The Blood Between Us

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The Blood Between Us

by lucsf1

Summary

As the heir to my family's empire, I'm expected to marry the perfect woman, produce heirs, and lead with an iron fist. But none of that ever felt right. Then comes him: Yulian. The one man I can't control.

I've hated him for years, ever since I was a child, when I was kidnapped by his father and we met for the first time. But somewhere, between the anger and the betrayal, something dark and dangerous ignited. Yulian is my obsession, my twisted need. And he's a threat to everything I thought I wanted.

I can't escape the pull of what he makes me feel. Yulian wants me just as much as I want him, and maybe that's the problem. I know it will destroy me, us, but it's a hunger I can't outrun.

This is a story of control, desire, and consuming obsession. And in the end, I know one thing for sure: Yulian is the one thing I can't let go of, no matter the cost.

Notes

Hi! I literally downloaded and read Kiss the Villain in one sitting, in about five hours, from midnight to 5am on release day. I was obsessed start to finish and absolutely loved it.

I was quickly enamored by Vaughn and Yulian and can't believe we have to wait a year for their story, so I've decided to write my own! This will be a full length novel of their story, or at least my own interpretation of it. I've studied Kiss the Villain so that the timeline matches up and it can be considered canon compliant.

I've planned most of the story, but of course I'm sure I'll change a few things as I go along.

As this is a full length novel, there will be some original characters for the plots sake. I will try not to feature them too much, as I know as a ff reader myself that original characters are a little annoying sometimes. But, as a completed story, I do want to flesh out my own characters a little and I hope that is okay.

One critique of Rina's books I usually find is side characters having no depth whatsoever and being important solely for the plot and this is something I would like to do differently in my own book.

In the end notes, I'll have a few questions about what people expect/want from this book and their relationship, so please read and comment if you can!

I hope you enjoy!

Chapter One

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Eight Years Ago

Vaughn

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The first thing I notice when I wake is the cold. The second is the hunger. My arms and legs ache and my head pounds. The floor is hard, unsurprising considering that it's concrete. Dim light shines from above, a small bulb hanging from the ceiling in this tiny room. I can feel thick ropes digging tightly into the skin of my wrists behind my back, with a thin blanket covering my lap. The only clothes I still have on are my underwear.

After my head clears a little and my vision stops blurring, I realise the room isn't that small after all, it's just full to the brim with boxes and other things, things you'd chuck into the basement and not touch for ten years. Because that's where I am, a basement. It has no windows and in front of me I see steep stairs leading up to what I assume is a door. Only the bottom step is visible as a ceiling to floor wall covers the rest of them.

A few cracks and holes can be seen, just about. A small bulb hangs from above me, but it's small and very dim. Though, it does shine enough for me to see what's covering the wall to my left. I'm sat in a corner and to my right is the piles and piles of clearly unkept things. But, to my left is something that makes my heart plummet.

A wall full of what can only be described as torture devices, knives, tasers, blow torches, pliers. Not to mention the ropes, gags and plastic bags. I breath harshly, curling in on myself. Not out of fear, but due to the cold

that only seems to be worsening.

I don't know how long it's been since I was taken. Surely, my parents would know by now and would be scouring the Earth for their only son. Being the heir to the Pakhan of the New York Bratva, kidnapping is something I've been prepared for, but I still feel unsettled.

My kidnapper's identity is still unknown to me. I was taken on the way to school, our guards seemingly no match for whatever thugs were employed to take me. I'm sure my father has already killed those that failed to keep me safe. If there is one thing that he does not play around about, it is mine and my mothers safety.

While they certainly put me at unease, I'm not massively frightened by the weapons to my left. I've clearly been taken as some sort of bargaining chip or ransom demand. If they wanted me dead, I'd already be dead. That means I'm needed alive and if negotiations of any sort are to work, torturing the Pakhan's ten-year-old son is not the way to go about it.

I wriggle my hands behind my back, testing the ropes. Clearly this is someone who knows what they are doing. The ropes are secure, a complex knot holding them tightly around my wrists. I could still get up though, as there is nothing holding me in place. I begin to shuffle myself up, the blanket falling away leaving me even colder as I start to shiver. I need to see the door at the top of the stairs, see if there is a way for me to escape.

However, just before I can push myself up, I freeze. Not because of the cold though, but because of a clicking sound echoing through the otherwise silent room. And while I can't see it, I hear the door at the top of the stairs slowly open, then the sound footsteps slowly climbing down toward me.

As he comes steps onto the final step and turns toward me, I grit my teeth. I know exactly who this is.

“Hello Vaughn.”

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Present

Yulian

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Blood pumps through my veins while ringing echoes through my ears. I can feel the aggression vibrating through me, my whole body on fire as I make my way toward the ring. Hands dart out from all around me, patting me on the back and cheering me on, screaming my name.

I crave it all. I embrace their shouts and grin widely, inhaling the adoration to add to my already huge ego. Even the loud music and commentator aren’t enough to overshadow how they all applaud for me. Sure, I hear shouts for my opposition too, from the other side of the ring, but it doesn’t affect me. I know what I’m capable of.

As I reach the edge of the ring, I quickly pull Mikhail toward me. My righthand man and probably best friend, he is always by side. “Don’t forget to film this,” I shout into his ear over all the screams.

“Yes sir,” he shouts obediently back. He may be my closest confident, but he still knows his place. In public at the very least, he shows me the respect I deserve, as his future Pakhan.

“Make sure you get a good shot of me beating this fuckers face in,” I grin. He smirks back and nods his head.

My opponent, Nikolai Sokolov, is damn good. Not that you would ever catch me admitting that to his face. But he is known as the punisher for a reason. His thirst for blood almost matches mine. He's definitely my favourite of the Heathens to fight, since he gets into it as much as I do. The violent throwing of fists, the sight of blood pouring and praises flung our way give us both a high like no other.

I climb into the ring, watching out of the corner of my eye as Mikhail holds his phone up, recording us. Good. Yet another present I can send to my Mishka. I do hope he will appreciate watching me beat the shit out of his friend.

As Nikolai takes his stance across from me, his teeth bearing and eyes wide, I punch my left hand into the palm of my right, showing him exactly what's coming. He doesn't cower or show fear, he never does, he simply grins wider and cracks his neck.

In the background of my mind, I register the commentator counting down, the crowd quickly joining in. But the blood rushing to my ears blocks it all out. I allow my breathing to slow and curl my hands into tight fists.

I don't move first, because I know Sokolov always will. He can't resist it.

He throws a punch, and I move my head, dodging it. He throws another quicker than I anticipate, however, and just about clips me across the face.

My grin widens.

We go back and forth for a while, the screams surrounding us getting louder and louder. Our bodies get more and more covered in blood.

Out of the corner of my eye, I make sure Mikhail is still filming.

Clashing over and over, my heart races on pure adrenaline. There are few other times I remember feeling this alive.

While both Niko and I crave blood and violence, I can reign it in much better than he can, likely as a result from our very different upbringings. He was taught to relish in it, to accept that part of him as who is he.

I, on the other hand, was forced to control it. To put a leash on myself, only allowing my true cravings to show in moments like this. My father has always ensured that I can control my impulses in every situation.

There is only one person who I can't hide them around. Who I have never been able to hide them around.

And he's the person whose about to receive a video of me beating the shit out of one of his best friends.

Deciding it's time for my Mishka to get his present, I charge at Nikolai with full force. My punches come flying, over and over again. He fights back well, but tonight is mine to win.

I obviously can't send him the videos where I lose. And tonight, I want nothing more than to feel his reaction. So, losing isn't an option.

Eventually, Sokolov finally slumps down, and the referee calls it, declaring me the winner. The crowd screams and chants my name, though I can hear faint booing coming from Niko's side as well. But I

don’t care.

In the corner of my eye, I spot Jeremy helping Nikolai out of the ring. I don’t pay attention, however. Instead, I turn my head toward Mikhail, more specifically, his phone. I look dead into the camera and wipe my face, knowing exactly how I must look.

I smirk. Hopefully my Mishka enjoys my gift.

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Vaughn

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Comfortably full, I hold the door open for Camilla, standing to the side so she can slip past me. A wide, lazy smile rests on her face as she thanks me. As I step out after her, I hold my arm out, and she curls her own around it, walking close to me as her head rests on my upper arm.

“Thanks for dinner tonight, V, it tasted great,” she grins at me.

I press a kiss to her forehead. “Don’t thank me yet Cami, the night is still far from over.”

I smirk at her and she laughs a little. Having been together for over two years now, she isn’t fazed by my ominous words. Dinner then movies has always been our go to, it’s basic, sure, but still a classic, not to mention Cami’s favourite thing.

As we approach the car, our driver steps out, nodding his head at me before opening the door and allowing Camilla to climb in. Waiting until the door closed behind her, I walk around to the other side and climb in myself.

I click my seatbelt in and feel the gentle movement of the car beneath us as we start heading toward the movie theatre. Beside me, she slides closer, dropping her head to my shoulder in a comfortable silence.

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Camilla laces her fingers through mine as we step into the theatre lobby, her manicured nails cool against my pale skin. She is dressed to perfection, as always—long coat cinched at the waist, heels clicking confidently against the smooth marble floor, hair styled in a perfect updo to look a mix of classy and gorgeous.

People looked as we passed. They always did. Aside from how obviously flawless we look together, there were definitely a few who recognised us through our families. I could tell by the way they straightened themselves and attempted to keep their blatant staring to a subtle glance. Not that it worked.

On paper we are perfect. She is the exact kind of girl a man like me should be with. Polished, graceful, beautiful, the eldest daughter of a family with old money and older connections. My family like her. My friends like her. Hell, *I* like her.

Maybe even love her.

Aside from her beauty, Camilla is both intelligent and cultured. She knows exactly how to hold herself in a room full of killers and psychopaths and pretend they're just businessmen. She is easy and

simple, exactly what I need.

Of course, the fact that I enjoy her company is a bonus too. We've been together since we were sixteen and known each other much longer. Our parents have been in business since we were both very young and so we always grew up around each other. Her parents pushed hard for us to get together (or as hard as they could push the New York Bratva), while mine liked her plenty, but left the ultimate decision up to me.

Growing up together, I've always enjoyed being around her. In public, she of course holds herself with grace and elegance. But in private? She can let loose and have fun. We watch movies and play games, cuddle while spending hours just talking.

Plus, the sex is of course amazing. We have both only ever been with each other and I'm fine with that, especially considering I'll probably marry her one day.

I've been thinking about it more and more lately. At eighteen, we are definitely too young for marriage, but in our world of traditional ideals, a young engagement is not uncommon. The leaders approve of us together and the alliance between our families would be extremely beneficial.

A life with her doesn't sound bad. Our children would be strong willed and gorgeous like her, perfect to take over the family business one day. She makes me happy; we would *be* happy. What more could I ask for?

But a small part of me still hesitates. We've said 'I love you' to each other and meant it. But then I look at my own parents. They aren't just happy together; they're consumed by one another. My parents live and breath for each other, worship the ground the other walks on.

And when I think about the way my father looks at my mother, I know I don't look at Camilla that way.

So, while I do love her, and I'm confident in that, I'm just not sure that I'm *in* love with her.

Nevertheless, marriage to a woman like her is what's expected of me. It's my duty. When I am with her, I am happy, and that is enough.

She leans into me as we walk toward the theatre, her voice light. "You're quiet tonight."

"Long day," I say simply.

She gives me a little smile and bumps her shoulder against mine. "Well, you'll like the movie. It's got that guy you think you're better looking than."

I smirk. "I am better looking than him."

She laughed, and it echoed through the hallway like bells. It's too loud, too practiced.

More and more, I find myself frustrated by her fakeness in public. The laugh she just gave me isn't her real one, not the one I get to hear late at night, when we curl up together and just talk, joke and cuddle. I understand why she acts this way, why it's so important for her to be nothing short of perfection where outside eyes and ears could be.

But, sometimes, I just wish my girlfriend would act like her real self in public. Someone who will act unashamedly like themselves in every situation and I can still say *yes, this person you see right here? This is exactly who I love.*

We find our seats, and she curls into my side as the lights dim. Her head rests on my shoulder like it belongs there. And it does. Maybe this is what my life will be. Predictable. Respectable. Safe.

Marry Camilla. Take over from my father. Keep the bloodline clean. Keep the empire intact.

It wouldn't be a bad life.

As the previews roll, I turn slightly to look at her; eyes fixed on the screen, lips parted slightly in anticipation. She is everything a man like me is meant to want.

I breathe out, a wave of stress leaving me. What am I even worrying about?

As I look at her now, makeup perfect, hair styled to the smallest detail, outfit matched head to toe, a calm, steady beat thrums in my chest. I feel completely and utterly content. This is the life I'm supposed to have.

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The movie ends to the sound of soft piano music swelling through the speakers. Camilla stretches as the credits roll, brushing her fingers through her perfect hair and leaning in to kiss my cheek. "Told you

you'd like it," she murmurs.

"I did," I lie easily, standing and offering her my hand.

I watch these movies because she likes them, not because I do. Honestly, I've never been entertained my movies or television much, I just don't have the attention span for them. I may not be a complete psychopath like my friend Killian, or as far as Niko and Jeremy, but I definitely show some of the traits.

She takes it, her fingers cold in mine as we walk out into the night. The air outside the theatre is crisp and biting, a reminder that fall is starting to settle in. Her heels click against the pavement as we head toward the car. We do the same song and dance with the driver, who has of course been waiting patiently, as always.

The drive is quiet. She hums softly to some pop song on the radio, and I keep my hand on her thigh, both possessive and affectionate. If there is one thing I don't do, it's share. I like to think I'm pretty good at giving Cami a lot of control over her own life and decisions. With only one exception, a few months ago.

But there is one thing she doesn't have a choice over, and it's that she is mine. She chose to be my girlfriend, chose to be my future wife, and so I will always be the only one that owns her. I have never liked sharing. When something is mine, it is only mine. Always.

She looks at me a few times, but says nothing, probably sensing that I've slipped into one of my moods. I do that a lot lately. Too much thinking.

We pull into the private garage below my apartment and head up in the lift. Our driver leaves, heading home for the night.

I don’t live far from my parents; I still see them constantly. But since starting university, I requested I get a bit more privacy, especially with Cami, which my parents agreed to. So, I bought this penthouse. She doesn’t live with me officially, but she is definitely here more than not. Living only a few minutes away from our campus also means it’s easier for her to stay here.

She’s already sliding her hands under my jacket before we make it through the door. Her lips press against my jaw, soft and familiar, as I kick the door shut behind us.

My apartment is clean thanks to the housekeeper that comes twice a week, and smells faintly of tobacco and expensive cologne. I barely register it anymore. Camilla leads me to the bedroom like she always does, confident in her place here.

By the time we make it to the bed, her coat is already on the floor and my shirt is half undone. Her hands are warm against my skin as she pushes me back onto the mattress, straddling my hips with a slow smile.

I grin up at her, leading her into a false sense of security before quickly flipping us around so I’m on top. She giggles, her real one this time, thankfully, and I start sliding my hand between her legs.

Then, my phone buzzes.

Twice.

I ignore it.

Then it buzzes again.

With a sigh, I reach for it, expecting some pointless update from one of the guys or a message from my mother reminding me about some upcoming family dinner.

But it isn't either of those things.

It's a video.

From him.

The name alone has my entire body tensing.

Camilla senses the shift in me immediately. "What is it?"

I don't answer. My thumb hesitates over the screen for a second before I hit play.

The image jumps to life, grainy and dim, clearly recorded underground. Two men in a ring. One of them is Nikolai.

The other is Yulian.

He's bare-chested, blood smearing one side of his face, but the grin on his lips is sharp and wicked as ever. He's fighting like he's dancing,

like pain is a game and every punch is foreplay. Niko puts up a fight, he's good, better than most, but in the end, it doesn't matter.

Yulian wins. Brutally. Efficiently. He stands over Niko's slumped body like a king surveying a battlefield, breathing hard, eyes wild. I briefly recognise Jeremy helping Niko out of the ring in the background before my vision is filled by Yulian. He turns directly to the camera, swiping blood from his mouth with the back of his hand.

My throat goes dry. He's covered in blood and grinning like the devil just gave him permission to run wild, and I hate that part of me still fucking reacts to him.

And he smirks.

That damn smirk.

Like he knows exactly who'll be watching this.

Me.

I stare at the screen long after the video ends. Camilla shifts beside me.

"Vaughn?" she says gently, touching my arm. "What was that?"

I finally look up at her, my jaw clenched so tight it aches.

“Just a message,” I say quietly, slipping the phone face-down on the nightstand. “From an old friend.”

“One of the other Heathens?” she questions, her voice naïve and not understanding.

I consider lying, however, and telling her she is right. I know exactly how this will go if I tell her the truth. But, then again, relationships apparently work best with proper communication, as my mom says.

“Yulian,” I grit out.

Her hand immediately rips from my arm, and she scoffs. “Of course it is.”

“Cami…” I begin.

She rolls her eyes. “As if he hasn’t destroyed enough. Now he’s trying to ruin our sex life too,” she says with a sarcastic tone.

“Cami, please,” I sigh, fed up with this conversation. “I’ve ignored the message and silenced my phone. Let’s just forget about it, please?”

“It’s pathetic.” I hear her whisper under her breath, shaking her head.

“Do not speak to me that way.” My voice is firm and frustrated. She may be my girlfriend, future wife even, but I will not tolerate her disrespect.

“Whatever,” she concedes. She climbs back onto my lap, kissing me roughly, the earlier playfulness gone. Her lips feel familiar, like a habit, not a craving.

I consider pushing her off, but as I feel myself harden and her hand slip into my underwear, I find all thoughts of Yulian slipping away.

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Yulian

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I watch as *read* appears beneath my messages, a sly grin overcoming my face. I wait a few minutes for him to reply.

But he doesn’t.

With each passing moment, I feel my frustration grow. I bet he is with *her* right now. Tangled together with *my* fucking property.

Fine.

If he doesn’t want to reply, then that’s his choice. But I think I’m getting a little fed up with being ignored from a continent away.

It’s time for a trip to New York.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed and are looking forward to the next chapter.

So I'd like to hear some of your views on what you think their dynamic/relationship is like (in canon, as that is what I'm trying to go off of). Like I've said, the story is already planned out, but if I feel like something isn't right, I'll change it.

I also want to know your opinions on who you think is the top/bottom, or if they are vers lol. I know what my thoughts are already, and I have planned accordingly. Rina typically seems to go with strict top/bottom dynamics, which would suggest they are not vers. But also Killian says he doesnt know if yulian wants to fuck vaughn or the other way around, which could be her hinting at them being vers. if they arent, Vaughn is the one with the nickname, Mishka, which would suggest he is the bottom as its always the bottom/girl who gets the nickname. But, also Yulian says he likes it when Vaughn gets rough which gives power bottom vibes?? plus vaughn throwing him around with his chain suggests top behaviour. but also Yulian is bigger than Vaughn, as he is described as tall and bulky whereas vaugh is leaner compared to the other heathens and we all know rina likes a bit of a size difference. so i honestly am not sure, and ended up picking my side based on all this, but am still open to changing my mind. so what do you all think.

Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

thanks so much for the positive response so far!
enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Yulian

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I pear my head around the corner of the hallway, my eyes trailing on the tall, domineering man striding away. Despite his purposeful steps, he is quiet as a mouse and if it weren't for how closely I were following him, I might just lose him in the vast corridors of our mansion.

As he turns another corner, I quickly follow, trying as much as I can to emulate the way he walks with complete silence, so he doesn't know I'm here. My father is a dominant man, the Pakhan of the Chicago Bratva. As his only son and heir, I'll grow up to take his place one day. At age eleven, I've already started learning his ways, preparing myself.

I crave the blood and violence as much as he does. He lets me watch his torture sessions on occasion, and almost always lets me see the executions. They excite me, hearing the screams, watching the blood drip. He doesn't let me participate in them, not yet anyway, but the observation is enough to satiate me for now.

As I round another corner, I quickly pause and backtrack. My father has stopped at the other end of the hall, standing in front of the door that leads to the basement. I'm not allowed in there without permission, hence why

it's always locked. I know what happens down there, as my father has allowed me to watch a few times.

He must have a new captive, then. Perhaps a traitor or someone who knows information he wants. I feel my skin tingle and my heart pound with excitement at what I might get to witness. He hadn't come get me, or even say a word to me about it, so I must not be allowed to observe this time, but that doesn't stop me.

My father opens the door slowly and walks purposefully down the steps into the basement. Quiet as possible, I follow. I can't follow him all the way down, as the only places to hide are on the other side of the room, behind boxes that I would have to walk past my father and the prisoner to get to. Instead, I sit gently near the top of the stairs, next to a small hole I know all too well.

I have been using it for years to watch the depravities that happen down here, and have yet to be caught.

"Hello Vaughn," I hear my father say.

I press my eye against the hole and my mouth drops at what I see. A boy, probably my age from what I can tell, sits against the wall, his hands clearly tied behind his back, baring his teeth at my father.

At first, I'm shocked by the captive's age. As far as I'm aware, my father has never kidnapped a child. Maybe a couple troublesome teenagers, sure, but a child? Never. Of course, I have no doubt of his abilities to seriously harm or even kill one, but I've just never seen him take one as a prisoner.

However, the shock about his age quickly falls to the back of my mind as I watch his face. He is glaring at my father. Baring his teeth at him. A boy of my age, facing down the Pakhan of the Chicago Bratva, kidnapped and

alone in a cold, dark basement, surrounded by torture tools. And all I see on his face is burning anger, not a hint of fear.

Something sparks within me. All my life I've seen people cower at my father's feet. First my mother when I was young, then the rest of the world as I grew. Every time I watch this, see my father in his most natural habitat, one of the first things I see is the petrifying fear on the captive's faces.

They beg and they cry and they bargain. I've seen grown men tremble and piss themselves locked in this room, shaking at my father's feet in fear of what he will do to them. But this boy, Vaughn, my mind whispers, shows not an ounce of it.

I'm intrigued.

Fascinated.

Enamoured.

Obsessed.

I want to know who this boy is. How he is so brave in the face of pain and potential death. But, most of all, I want to see fear in his eyes. But I don't want my father to put it there with his threats and his torture and his cruelty. I want to put it there myself. I want to be the one that makes Vaughn break.

"Anatoly Dimitriev," Vaughn replies, his voice strong and steady.

I get goosebumps at it. It's not particularly deep, in fact, it's not deep at all, being as young as he is. But it's his, and for that, I immediately crave it more.

"So, you know who I am," my father replies, sounding unbothered. He stands with his arms crossed in front of Vaughn, his tall stature enough to make grown men tremble. But not Vaughn.

"The Pakhan of the Chicago Bratva? Of course, I know who you are. My father made sure of it. What I don't understand is why I'm here. Last I checked, our families were civil. I hate to think of what my family will do to you once they get their hands on you."

It sounds odd, sentences so sophisticated and proper coming out of such a young mouth. Most children our age still stumble over their words at times. But not him. I want to know why.

"Well, Vaughn Morozov," my father says mockingly, and that certainly makes something click in my brain, "your father has decided to piss me off, so I've decided to piss him off back."

I might not have known the name Vaughn, but I certainly know the name Morozov, namely Kirill Morozov, the Pakhan of the New York Bratva. He is a powerful man, even one my father doesn't mess with. Not usually, anyway. I wonder what Kirill must have done in order for my father to go so far as to kidnap his son. This is means for war.

Vaughn's mature speech patterns make more sense now. The heir to the mafia, he will have been groomed for nothing short of perfection just the way I have been.

"Well, I'm sure whatever he did was nothing short of deserved," Vaughn grins, tilting his head slightly.

My father remains quiet for a moment, completely still. With his back to me, I can't see his facial expression. But I can read his body language. He's pissed. But not in a rageful way where he loses his temper and his restraint, as he has done in the past. But a controlled way, where he can use his anger in any way he wants.

After a moment, he steps toward Vaughn, still silent, and punches him hard across the face. Vaughn lets out a pained yelp, clearly not seeing the hit coming. He falls backward, hitting his head against the wall behind him and sliding down it. He doesn't lose consciousness, but his heavy breathing indicates he's close.

Father gives him a moment to calm down, to catch his breath, to lead him into a false sense of security. Then, when Vaughn's chest slows, my father strikes again. This time, he doesn't wait between strikes. He is on his knees, punching over and over and over. Then he stands and I think it's over. But no, he begins kicking instead, quick, calculated movements against Vaughn's torso and stomach.

The boy attempts to wrap his arms around himself, but it doesn't do much. Still, he doesn't scream or cry or beg, just lets out pained grunts. Finally, it stops.

Going down onto one knee, my father grabs Vaughn by his throat, pulling him up so that the only thing keeping him in place is the hand slowly killing him. With his other hand, my father reaches into his pocket and grabs his phone. He lines it in front of Vaughn's face which is starting to get very red as he claws desperately and weakly against my father's hand.

My father snaps a picture and finally drops Vaughn, who gasps for breath. Standing, my father takes a step back and looks down at Vaughn.

“I hope your father will appreciate the sign of life, no matter how close it is to death.”

With that, he turns and walks toward the stairs. Quickly, I turn and, as quietly as possible, run back up the stairs and through the halls to my room. However, the last glimpse I got of Vaughn, his eyes filled with fury, glaring at my retreating fathers back, still no fear in sight, haunts my dreams for weeks.

-

Present

Yulian

-

My hood hangs low over my face as I stalk through the busy streets of New York. I’ve just spent a long, hard day following Vaughn around. He kept glancing over his shoulder suspiciously, but I’m too good to get caught. Still, I liked seeing how alert and aware he is. He must’ve felt me somewhere behind him, like a shadow pressed too close.

What did frustrate me, though, was the blonde doll glued to his arm all day. The fake giggles. The pristine elegance. The way she curled herself around him like she belonged. It made something in me coil tight, an old, bitter jealousy gnawing under my skin.

How dare she touch what's mine?

I decided a long time ago; no one touches Vaughn but me.

I called it a day when they finally separated. Apparently, she’s going

out with her girlfriends tonight, and Vaughn has business with his father. Fine. I can wait another night before confronting him about why he's ignoring me. Avoiding me like I'm not the one he dreams about.

But just as I turn the corner toward where I'm staying, something catches my eye.

She's there.

Camilla.

Perched on the edge of the block, surrounded by tall, beautiful women all holding hands and laughing too loud. Long hair. Glossy lips. That same practiced sway of the hips like she's on a runway. I didn't recognize her immediately as she's not in her usual label-drenched, preppy look.

No, tonight she's dressed like she's trying to impress the wrong kind of attention.

A short black dress clings to her like a second skin, ending at her mid-thigh. Her heels are tall enough to make her wobble, the kind that scream "take me home" without saying a word.

But when she turns, and the streetlight catches her eyes-

I could have kept walking.

But I didn't.

She starts toward a bar tucked beneath a rusted sign, the kind of place she'd never normally be caught dead in. Interesting choice. I follow at a casual pace, hood still up, melting into the crowd behind her group.

Inside, the lighting is low and sultry. Everything smells like sweat, smoke, and cheap perfume. She's laughing with her friends at the bar, oblivious to the eyes on her. My eyes.

I slide in beside her, silent and unnoticed.

I raise a hand for the bartender.

"Your most expensive drink for the gorgeous lady to my left," I say smoothly, loud enough to be heard over the hum of voices and the thump of bass, but not loud enough to draw attention. Just enough to make her turn.

She does.

"Excuse you, I'll have you know that I'm-" she cuts off when I turn to face her fully.

Recognition dawns slowly.

"Yulian," she breathes, voice small. Her eyes drag over me, unsure of what I want. She is probably wondering why I'm in New York. After all, if the wrong person catches me, I'm a dead man.

I smile lazily. Tilt my head toward the back of the bar, where it's darker. Quieter.

I don't wait for her answer. I just walk.

Behind me, I hear her stammer something to her friends. A bathroom break, maybe. I don't care.

She follows.

Of course she does.

We slip into the shadowy alcove, tucked between red leather booths and half-lit sconces. The music fades to a dull pulse behind us. She stops a few paces away, arms folded, trying to look in control.

"Are you following me now?" she says. Her tone's light, but I see the flash of irritation underneath. "Sending those ridiculous videos to V wasn't enough? I'm surprised you haven't been caught yet. Pretty lucky considering what will happen to you when V gets his hands on you."

"Who says I don't want V's hands on me?" I grin slyly at her disgusted face. "Besides, I don't believe in luck," I say smoothly, draping one arm over the back of the booth. "Only timing."

She rolls her eyes, but there's a flicker of something in her expression. Recognition. Curiosity. Maybe regret.

“I didn’t even recognise you at first, when V showed me those videos you kept sending him,” she says after a moment, eyes scanning my face like she’s still putting pieces together. “You’ve changed.”

I choose to ignore the burst of rage I feel at Vaughn showing her the videos I may especially for him and instead flash a grin. “Change is inevitable. University is so much more fun that anyone said it would be. How is your first semester going? You feeling lonely yet? I mean, from what I’ve gathered, you and Vaughn were the only two to stick around here.”

Her jaw clenches and I see her look away. Interesting. I think I’ve struck a nerve. She doesn’t answer.

I sit back, studying her. “So, tell me, Camilla… why are you still here? Why didn’t you follow the rest of your little mafia clique to the university?”

She hesitates at first, seemingly contemplating. Finally, she says, “Because he wouldn’t go.”

“Vaughn?”

She nods, the word bitter in her mouth. “Everyone else went. All our closest friends. It’s where we were supposed to be. But Vaughn, he refused. Said he wouldn’t set foot near that place if you were there.”

My smile widens. “How flattering.”

She glares at me. “Don’t flatter yourself. I begged him. Pleaded. Told him it didn’t matter. That I wanted to be there with my friends. But no. His pride had to come first. He knew the kind of trouble you two being near one another would bring and decided to be the bigger person, staying far away. And since I’m his girlfriend, his accessory, I had to stay with him.”

I raise an eyebrow. “So, you’re mad at him for making you stay?”

“No.” Her voice hardens. “I’m mad at him for dragging me into your twisted obsession. For treating me like I don’t matter unless I’m on his leash. I didn’t sign up for this... this pissing contest between you two.”

Ah. There it is. Resentment, buried under layers of glitter and gloss. She hates being sidelined. Hates knowing that even now, it’s still me who haunts Vaughn's every move.

But now she has released that first breath of frustration, it’s like she can’t stop.

“I just wanted a few years. That’s all. A little freedom. I’m fine with the rest; the wife, the ring, the mansion. I even look forward to it. But I wanted something for myself first. A lifetime of luxury, free to do as I please and in return all I have to do is pop out a few children.”

Rage settles over me at the idea of her having his children. Absolutely not. That will not be happening.

“But I wanted to have some fun first. A little partying with my friends. Freedom away from our parents.” She rolls her eyes. “But instead, I’m here. Exactly where I have always been and always will be. I love Vaughn, I really do. Yet every day I see how much fun our friends and family are having on that island while I am stuck here because of him.

I go out with these girls I barely know, have to party on the bad side of town so no one sees me. Because when I begged him to do what I wanted he said no. Because of you. Because he chose a man he despises over the girl he loves."

I choose to ignore the details and focus on what I want to hear. He chose me over her. Now that does get me all up in my feels.

As much as I am enjoying this, I let myself hesitate. Sure, I understand while she is frustrated. But for my Mishka, she should be willing to do anything. Give up her future. Do as she is told. Burn the world down. I'd totally do all those things for him.

So, as I see her sat before me, talking badly about him behind his back to his sworn enemy, I get angered on his behalf. Who is she to say these things about him? What else could she be capable of doing behind his back. I know my Mishka and I will be together eventually, even if I have to wait for him to stop being an idiot first. But if he must be with someone else until it happens, it could at least be someone loyal.

I have to test her. See if she is really good enough for Vaughn. He must have chosen her for a reason, but I need him to see that she can never be as good as me.

I let my voice soften. "If it had been me," I say, watching her closely, "I would've taken you with me. Let you choose where you wanted to go. Given you freedom."

She snorts. "Right. You, offering freedom."

"I would've let you have your friends. Your life. I don't believe in caging beautiful things."

Her eyes flicker. That struck something.

I lean in slightly, lowering my voice. “He doesn’t see you, does he? Not really. Not beyond the surface. But I do. You know I’ve watched you both for years. Did you really think it was about him. That I was watching him when you were right there?”

I want to vomit in my mouth.

She doesn’t reply. Not at first. Her lashes drop, her fingers tightening around her glass. The silence between us stretches long and taut, until her shoulders relax just enough for me to know I’ve gotten in.

“You’re pretty good at saying the right thing,” she murmurs.

“And you always like hearing it,” I murmur back.

She looks up, and this time her gaze lingers. There’s a glint there now, hesitation giving way to temptation.

I raise a hand, brushing a stray hair from her cheek with the back of my knuckle. She doesn’t pull away.

“I shouldn’t be doing this,” she whispers. “He would never forgive me. He would ruin me.”

I smile, slow and deliberate. “But you are. He doesn’t have to know.

Just one night. Please, sweetheart. I've admired you for so long. Just think of it as letting some steam out. He betrayed you first. This way, you can get back at him, but he never has to know anything was wrong in the first place."

She bites her lip like she's trying to convince herself this means something. That it's revenge. Rebellion. An eye for an eye.

And that's when I know.

She would betray him. She is betraying him.

She wants to use me to hurt him. And then ensure he never finds out, play him for a fool.

I sit back, grin tightening. She's not worthy of Vaughn. Not even a little. He deserves more than this petty, bitter thing clinging to his shadow.

So, I make a choice.

I'll show him exactly what she is.

"You want to get out of here?" I ask, already knowing the answer.

She hesitates only a moment. "Yeah."

She quickly makes her way over to her friends, whispering something

while holding her stomach. Guess she's doing a lot of deceiving tonight. Looking around nervously, she makes her way back over to me.

I offer my hand. She takes it.

And just like that, we leave together.

Let her think it's her choice. Let her feel powerful.

Let her believe she's the one doing the using.

She has no idea that she's already lost.

-

I thrust into her roughly from behind. Her thick moans bounce around the room as she grips the bedsheets below her. She calls my name over and over.

I spot my phone lying beside us on the bed. Now is the time.

Grabbing her by the waist, I pull out and quickly flip us around. She wastes no time sliding down on top of me, bouncing fast and hard. She places her hands on my chest, leans her head back, closes her eyes, and goes to town.

The sex is okay.

I actually kind of like how she is just taking her own pleasure. But her hips are too wide, her skin too soft. I wonder if Vaughn's is rougher. Sharper. I bet he bites. Her curved breasts bounce on each thrust, and I can't help but picture them not being there.

With her eyes closed, I seize my chance. With one hand on her waist, helping her move up and down, I grab my phone with the other and quickly start filming. I leave the flash off, for obvious reasons. The lights aren't on either, but my room has ceiling to floor windows and with the bustling New York nightlife, enough light shines it to make it perfectly clear on camera what is happening right now.

Fifteen minutes later, she is passed out beside me on the bed while I stare at the video of her bouncing on my cock on phone. She screams my name multiple times, head thrown back and moving like her life depends on it.

Bitch.

How dare she cheat on my Mishka. Call another man's name when she has nothing short of perfection at her fingertips?

Okay, fine. I was the one she cheated with. But I needed to prove that she is not loyal to him. Not like I could be.

I consider sending him the video right now. But I hesitate. I'd still like to speak with him before heading back to the island and something tells me if he gets that video first, the chat may not be as productive as I hope.

With one last look at the cheating piece of filth lying beside me, I get

dressed and head out. I won't be coming back, so I don't worry about leaving her there.

I have someone important to speak to.

-

Vaughn

-

I know my locks are secure.

I triple-checked them. Top bolt, deadlock, code entry. Yet when I step out of the shower and catch the faint scent of smoke and expensive cologne in the air, I know I'm not alone.

And sure enough, there he is. Sitting on my sofa like it's his throne.

Yulian.

Legs spread wide. Black shirt unbuttoned just enough to show a hint of tattoo curling along his collarbone. One arm slung across the back of the couch, the other holding the remote to my TV like he owns the place. Like he owns me. I certainly know he thinks he does.

"What the hell?" I snap, instinctively reaching for the drawer where I keep a gun tucked away.

He doesn't flinch. Doesn't even blink.

“Miss me?” he says, looking up with that fucking smile. The one that makes people stupid. Weak. Dangerous.

“How did you get in?” I ask.

“I let myself in.” He tosses the remote onto the coffee table. “You really should beef up security, Mishka. It’s like you wanted me to come say hi.”

I don’t answer. Just stare. Calculating.

He leans forward, elbows on his knees. “Did you like the video?”

I tense before I can stop myself. The fight. The one where he beat the shit out of one of my best friends who I’ve known my entire life, then stared straight into the camera at the end like he was doing it for me. Because he was. He always does.

“It was messy,” I say. “Sloppy. From what I saw, he was still awake by the end.”

“Only because I didn’t want to make you sad.” Yulian shrugs. “He is still one of your best friends. Can’t kill him just yet.”

“Do you expect a thank you?”

“I expected something. A text. A voice note. Maybe even a little kissy

emoji.”

“You’re delusional.”

“You’re avoiding me.”

“You’re a psychopath.”

He laughs, low and amused. “Wonder how your friends would take that. Pretty sure they fit the label as much as I do. Hell, you fit the label as much as I do. That’s why we work, Mishka.”

I ignore his ridiculous flirting. I’ve been doing it for eight years so far, I’ll happily continue. “Why send the video in the first place?”

He grins. “Because you didn’t answer the last four I sent.”

There it is. The real reason he’s here.

“I figured if I hurt someone that mattered to you,” he says, voice dropping lower, more intimate, “you’d finally pay attention.”

I turn away from him, trying to focus, trying to breathe. The sheer audacity of him, waltzing in here like he owns me. Like he hasn’t left a trail of wreckage behind.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” I mutter.

“And yet-” he spreads his arms- “here I am.”

I whirl on him. “Why? Why now?”

Yulian cocks his head. “Because you didn’t come to the island. And I thought maybe you forgot about me.”

While the words are vulnerable, his expression says otherwise. He has a small pout, like he is having fun with this. He is trying to manipulate me. He always does. It’s who he is.

I snort. “Trust me. My decision to remain here had nothing to do with you.”

There’s a flicker of something in his eyes, amusement, maybe. Like he knows I’m lying right now.

“Though I’d be lying if I didn’t admit it’s nice to know that there is an ocean in between us. Certainly, makes it easier to ignore you and pretend you don’t exist.”

His smile falters for a half-second, then snaps back in place.

“You’re a liar. A manipulator. You play people like chess pieces and then act surprised when they bleed,” I grit at him, unable to control myself. I know this is what he wants, for me to lash out, but I can’t help it.

His eyes narrow, like he's searching for something. Then he grins again. "You always did have a thing for loyalty. For trust. A serious possessive streak."

"What's mine is mine," I declare. "You remember I don't like to share."

"Indeed, I do. But I'd guess the things you don't like to share now are very different to what they were when we were children." His grin turns into a smirk, and I know without a doubt that he knows something I don't. He has the upper had here and he knows it.

In just my towel, I feel exposed to him. With his unknown information and my vulnerability, I need the upper and back.

"I don't play your games anymore," I say.

Yulian walks right up to me, stopping only inches away. His boots are soundless against the hardwood, like a shadow sliding across the room. His voice drops into a whisper. "Oh, but you do, Mishka. You're playing it right now."

His hand lifts, fingers ghosting along my jaw. My breath catches before I can stop it. I allow his head to lean forward, gazing straight into his eyes. Then-

I reach up with my own hand and wrap it tightly around his neck, as tight as I can. I push him backward, against the nearest wall I can. A loud thud sounds and I'm pretty sure I hear a picture frame fall. He's taller. Broader. But I've got rage on my side. He fights back, though I can tell he is enjoying this.

“You know I love it when you lose your cool, Mishka,” he chokes out as I take his breath away.

“What do you want, Yulian?”

He doesn’t answer right away. His eyes scan my face like he’s trying to memorize every crack. His face is slowly turning purple. “I just wanted to talk.”

“Bullshit.”

“Fine,” he says, grinning again. “I also wanted to see that vein in your neck pop when you get angry. It’s doing wonders for me right now.”

With that, he pushes against me so hard I lose my balance and step back from him. He breathes in deeply, chest rising with a lazy satisfaction. "Always such passion," he says, rolling his neck like he didn’t just have my hand around it.

“I should kill you,” I hiss.

He smirks. “You’d miss me too much.”

I move toward him again, fists clenched, but this time, he moves first.

His fist cracks against my jaw before I even register his shift. A single, explosive punch that sends pain ricocheting through my skull. I stumble, hit the floor hard, the world tilting on its axis.

For a moment, everything is muffled. My vision fuzzes at the edges, my thoughts tangled.

By the time I push myself up, dizzy and breathless, he's gone.

The front door hangs ajar. There's no sound. No trace of him, like he was never here at all.

Something glints beside on the table.

I reach down and pick it up, a small, gold earring. Delicate. Familiar.

Camilla's.

My pulse spikes. I bought these for her. And she's out tonight.

A cold dread slithers down my spine.

Yulian wouldn't-

No, he absolutely would.

He must've broken into her place. Rummaged through her things. Left this here as a message. A threat. I fumble for my phone, fingers slick with panic, and dial her number. It rings twice.

“Hello?” Her voice is soft, a little breathy and disoriented.

“Camilla. Are you okay?”

There’s a pause. “Vaughn?”

“Are you back at your apartment?”

We had agreed she would come back to mine after she was finished out with her friends.

“Yeah, yeah, I just got back.” Another pause. “Why? What’s going on?”

“You sure everything’s locked? Nothing out of place?”

She hesitates. “Uh… yeah. Why?”

“I think Yulian might’ve been there. I thought you said you would come back to mine after you were done.”

She stiffens on the other end of the line. I can hear the slight rustle of sheets. A shift in breath.

“I- I didn’t want to wake you,” she says quickly. “So, I just decided to head back to my place. I fell asleep straight away.”

Something doesn't feel right, but it's probably the paranoia of knowing he was in my girlfriend's home.

"You're going to stay with me tonight. At least until I'm sure he is gone."

"Vaughn-"

"No. I'm serious. I'm coming to get you."

"No," she blurts quickly. Too fast. "I mean, I'll come to you. It's fine. I just need a minute to get dressed."

"Camilla-"

"I'll be there soon, okay?"

I clench my jaw, every instinct on high alert, but I don't push her. I've just told her my sworn enemy broke into her apartment. She is probably terrified.

"Fine," I mutter. "Just... don't take long."

She hangs up with a mumbled goodbye.

I lower the phone, staring again at the earring in my palm.

I'll kill him if he lays a hand on her.

-

Yulian

-

I lean back on my sofa, breathing the quiet air in.

I arrived back on the island just a few hours ago. When I took a shower and saw the faint bruises around my neck, I felt myself harden as I grinned. With an ocean in between us again, I think it's time for Vaughn to see just the person he is with right now. Show him how much better he deserves.

Pulling out my phone, I scroll to his contact. I don't hesitate to send the video of his girlfriend riding my cock while screaming my name.

I wonder if I'll get a reply this time.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading :)

Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

hello everyone! I hope you are enjoying the story so far. I want to answer a few questions I have got/reply to some comments.

Firstly, thanks to everyone who commented their opinions on the top/bottom/vers debate, I'm like 99% sure I have decided which I'm gunna go with. I apologise for not replying, i promise i read every comment and took them into consideration! i just didnt want to reply to the ones soley about that as i didnt want to give anything away, but thank you so much for commenting!

Secondly, I had a couple people ask how often I will be updating, especially as this is my third day in a row haha. unfortunately it isnt always going to be like this. I actually had the first four chapters written before i even posted the first chapter, with the exception of the flashbacks at the start of each one, which is why its been so easy to get them out once a day despite being so long. Ive also had a relatively free week. but i am a full time student and have a part time job, so i wont be able to post this frequently when i havent got chapters lined up ready to go.

however, next week is the start of easter break and i have a month or so off. I obviously have work to do during it, plus my actual job, but im hoping to get a lot done during that time (maybe even finish it). i am quite a quick writer, especially when i have it already planned out (which i do). though daily updates are definitely a no go. but thank you to the people that asked! sorry i didnt reply personally, but i figured it would be easier to just type it here rather than individually reply to everyone.

chapters also wont always be this long. i know this is a long one, probably will be one of the longest. the flashbacks also wont be for the entire story, so when they stop, it should cut the word count down a little.

i think thats everything, ill just edit if i remember anything. thanks for reading and enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Vaughn

-

I have been prepared for this. I tell myself it over and over again like a mantra. Yet, no matter how much I think about all the conversations and scenarios I ran through with my family about a possible kidnapping, nothing seems to have fully prepared me for the real thing.

I'm still freezing, and that's with the thin set of pyjamas Anatoly gave me. But the cold is nothing in comparison to the hunger. I have a half full bottle of water that I'm trying to ration, just like I think dad would. It's been a few days and I have only been fed once since I got here, a measly two slices of bread.

That was well over twenty-four hours ago and the hunger is really settling into my bones. I've kept a brave face every time Anatoly has visited me, though it's not been too difficult considering how angry I am, especially on my father's behalf.

There have been no more beatings, but he has taken several more photos. I'm not sure if it's on my family's insistence or just him wanting to taunt them more.

I hear the door creak open and tense myself. There may not have been any more beatings yet, but I have no doubt they will come eventually.

However, my strong stance falters in my confusion as I hear Anatoly walk down the stairs. I can't see him due to the wall, but I can hear him. And I'm pretty sure that's not Anatoly. The steps are much too light. Perhaps even too light for a woman. Almost like-

A child.

A young boy, about my age, maybe a tad older, stands in front of me, staring. His head is cocked slightly to the side, his brows slightly furrowed as if he is trying to look into my very soul.

He doesn't say a word. Just watches me.

I blink, caught off guard by his presence. I shift slightly where I'm sitting, the movement sending a jolt of pain through my ribs, likely bruised from the last visit. But I keep my face still, calm, impassive. He's watching me like I'm some kind of puzzle he's halfway through solving, and I'll be damned if I give him a single piece he doesn't have to earn.

"You're Vaughn," he says finally. His voice is quiet, but steady. Certain. And there's a strange lilt to it, not childish, not hesitant, but almost… pleased.

I lift my chin. "Clearly, your father's not the only stalker in the family."

The boy's lips twitch. Not a smile, exactly. More like a flicker of something darker. Amusement, maybe. Satisfaction.

"You're not afraid of him," he says, walking closer. His footsteps are light, calculated, silent in a way no child's should be. He moves like he's mimicking someone or has been taught to hunt instead of play. "Even after what he did to you."

I don't answer. If this kid's anything like Anatoly, silence might be my best weapon.

But he's persistent.

"Why?"

"Because fear doesn't help." My voice comes out hoarse from thirst, but it's steady. "It never has."

He stops a few feet away, crouching down to my eye level. His eyes roam my face, taking in the bruises, the dried blood at my temple, the hollow look I can't quite hide no matter how hard I try.

"You're not like anyone I've ever seen down here," he says softly. "They always cry. Or beg. Or try to pretend they aren't terrified. But you... you just glare."

My mouth twitches. "Would you prefer I cry for you?"

His eyes light up at that, and for the first time I feel a flicker of real unease crawl up my spine. He doesn't flinch at my words. Doesn't get angry. He enjoys it. Enjoys the challenge. Like he wants to break me himself, not out of cruelty exactly, but curiosity. Obsession.

"No," he whispers. "I like the glaring."

I hold his gaze, refusing to look away. "Who the hell are you?"

He tilts his head again, and this time he smiles. It's a slow, creeping thing.

All teeth and something dangerous beneath it.

“I’m Yulian.”

I know that name. I’ve heard my father say it before. It was muttered like a warning under his breath whenever Anatoly’s family came up. The boy. His boy. The one he’s grooming to take over.

And now he’s here. Watching me like a collector who’s just found the rarest artifact.

He crouches down, a slow, deliberate motion, like he’s trying not to scare me. Or maybe he just likes pretending to be gentle.

“I brought you something,” he adds, reaching into the oversized hoodie he’s wearing and pulling out a napkin-wrapped sandwich. It looks slightly squashed, like he smuggled it from upstairs. He holds it out but doesn’t come closer.

I glance at the sandwich, then back at him. “Why?”

He blinks and then shrugs. “Because I wanted to.” A pause. “You’ve barely eaten.”

“So, you’ve been watching me?”

He smirks now, the expression curling one corner of his mouth. “Yes.”

I should feel disturbed. I do, a little. But mostly, I feel curious. Something about him doesn't match the place we're in. He doesn't look like a monster's son. He looks like a boy who might sit beside me at school, maybe share a textbook. But he's not. I know better.

I don't take the sandwich.

"I'm not eating anything your father sends," I say coldly.

"It's not from him," he says quickly. "It's mine. I made it."

I raise an eyebrow.

He sighs and walks forward, slowly, then sets the sandwich a couple feet from me. He doesn't come any closer, just sits cross-legged on the cold concrete floor.

"I'm Yulian."

"Didn't ask."

His grin widens. "You don't talk much, huh?"

"Not to strangers."

"I'm not a stranger anymore. I told you my name."

“You think that makes us friends?”

“No,” he says. “But I think it means I can talk to you. And you can talk to me.”

I scoff but don’t say anything. My stomach growls, loud and humiliating, and Yulian glances at the sandwich pointedly. When I still refuse to move, he grabs it. He takes a tiny bite of it, enough that he has a little of every part of the sandwich, but not enough that there isn’t plenty left.

I watch as he chews and swallows it, then places it back down in front of me before backing up again. I hesitate, then crawl forward slowly, grabbing it and retreating back against the wall.

“I didn’t poison it, as you can see” he says.

“I’ll be the judge of that.”

He laughs. It’s bright, genuine, completely out of place in this dark, disgusting basement. I eat slowly, watching him the whole time. He doesn’t seem uncomfortable. In fact, he looks perfectly at ease, like sitting across from a bloodied, kidnapped boy in a torture chamber is his version of a fun afternoon.

I scrunch my nose at the area where he took a bite.

“Don’t like germs?” Yulian asks me. “I promise I have very good hygiene.

“Don’t like to share,” I reply. I never have.

He says nothing, but a smirk spreads across his face.

“What’s your game?” I ask after a few bites.

He tilts his head again. “No game. I just wanted to meet you.”

“Because your father dragged me here?”

“No,” he says simply. “Because you looked at him like you wanted to kill him.”

That startles me.

“I’ve never seen anyone do that,” he goes on. “Not adults, not soldiers, not traitors. They all cry. Or beg. But you… you looked at him like he was nothing.”

He sounds awed.

I shift uncomfortably under his gaze. “He is nothing.”

Yulian leans in a little. “You really believe that?”

“Don’t you?”

He doesn't answer. For a second, I see something flicker in his eyes, pain, maybe, or hesitation- but then it's gone.

"He's powerful," Yulian says. "But that doesn't mean I like him."

"So, what are you doing here? Playing both sides?"

"No," he replies. "I'm on my own side. I just… wanted to see you up close."

I snort. "I'm not a zoo animal."

"No, you're better," he says, too fast. "You're… different."

I narrow my eyes. "You're weird."

"Probably."

There's a pause. Silence hangs between us. I should feel more threatened by him than I do. But instead, I feel oddly… seen. And more than that: understood.

He lies back on the floor, hands behind his head like he's stargazing. "Do you think stars can see us?" he asks suddenly.

"What?"

“Like… do you think the stars look down and watch people? Like we watch them?”

I stare at him. “That’s a stupid question.”

He laughs again, turning his head toward me. “Yeah. But maybe not.”

I hate how easily I start smiling.

I finish the sandwich. He watches me like he’s memorising every movement.

“You always this talkative?” I ask.

“Only with people I like.”

“You don’t even know me.”

“I’m starting to,” he says softly.

I glance away, suddenly unsure of what to say. I haven’t spoken to anyone this much since I got here. Hell, I haven’t wanted to. But now…

“What’s it like?” I ask. “Being his son?”

Yulian is quiet for a long time. Then, finally, “lonely.”

Something about the honesty in his voice cuts through me more than the cold ever did.

I nod slowly. "Same."

Our eyes meet. There's something strange between us now. Something quiet, but heavy. Like we're both aware that this conversation, this moment, isn't supposed to exist. We're enemies. We're heirs. We're two boys sitting on the floor of a basement, finding comfort where we shouldn't.

"I wish I could take you outside," Yulian says. "Show you the garden. There's a koi pond."

"You have koi fish?"

"Yeah. They're weird. They stare at you like they know things."

"I'd rather not be stared at anymore."

His lips curve. "Fair."

We fall into silence again. But it's not uncomfortable. It's… peaceful. Almost warm. The kind of quiet you don't notice until it's gone.

"How long are you going to stay here?" I ask.

“The latest I can stay is until the morning, when my father comes to visit. I’m not supposed to be here. But until then, as long as you want.”

I don’t believe him, not wholly. I can’t in this place. I’m constantly on edge with my guard up, prepared for anything. This boy, who is my father’s rival’s son, who will likely be my own rival one day, cannot be trusted.

I will not allow him to get close enough to betray me.

-

Present Day

Vaughn

-

Closing the front door, I make my way toward my office, prepared to get some family business done. I have no doubt my university workload will start piling up soon enough and I want to make sure everything mafia-side is up to date before it does.

I’ve just shown Camilla out after she spent the night at my place after Yulian’s break in. She was acting weird all night, but I suppose it’s to be expected after being told a rival mafia leader broke into your home and stole your things. She is heading to a morning class, obviously escorted by bodyguards.

According to our sources, Yulian got on a plane as soon as he left my place, but I can never be too sure.

I’m halfway through an email to my uncle Damien, my mind foggy from too little sleep and too many thoughts, when a vibration

skittered across the desk. I glanced down at my phone, expecting an update from Jeremy or some text from either of my parents.

But it wasn't from any of them.

I freeze when I spot the name on the message. Despite the many videos I've been receiving from him lately, I still feel my breath hitch when I see its from him. There are no words in the text, just a video attachment.

Surely, he can't have already had another fight. He would have only landed a few hours ago, at most.

I stare at it for a second, a chill inching up my spine, before my thumb hesitates above the screen. One tap. The message opens.

1 Attachment. No text. No explanation.

I should ignore it. Stop giving into his games. Forget whatever bullshit he thinks he can drag me into this time. But I don't.

Instead, I tap play.

At first, it was dark. A low-lit room, shadows stretching over expensive sheets. I turn the brightness up. Then immediately wish I hadn't. A shift of skin and limbs. Soft gasps. Camilla's voice, unmistakable even distorted through the speakers.

My breath catches.

Her head tilted back. Her hair messy, her mouth parted in an orgasmic ‘O’ sound she always makes with me. Her nails digging into his chest from the way she uses it to help her bounce up and down.

Every muscle in my body locks. I can’t blink. Can’t breathe.

I jerk out of my own head when I hear her speak.

“Yulian…” she moans. Over and over and over.

He was fucking her. Or rather she was fucking herself on him. Fast. Hard. One hand wrapped around her waist. The other holding the bedframe behind him, gripping it tightly. With her eyes closed and head thrown back, for a split second I wonder if she even knows she is being filmed. But then I realise I don’t care.

Because even if she doesn’t know she is being filmed, *he* certainly does.

He looks straight at the camera.

He looks straight at me.

The whole video is just under two minutes. It’s not the entire act, just the end of it.

Just under two minutes is all it took to crack something deep inside

me.

I watch the whole thing. From start to finish. Frozen. Trapped between disbelief and rage and something worse. Something I don't want to name.

The screen goes black.

My stomach twists.

I stand up so fast the chair scrapes across the floor with a harsh squeal. The phone slips from my fingers and lands with a hard thud on the wooden floor, but I don't look down. I can't. I just stand there, chest heaving, heart racing like I've been punched in the throat.

The memories of the video burn behind my eyes like acid. My jaw is clenched so hard that my teeth hurt.

I want to destroy something.

I want to destroy *them*.

Camilla. Angelic, confident, graceful, Camilla. The girl who would hold my hand and lay her head on my shoulder like it meant something. Who looked at me like I was all she ever wanted. Who promised, swore, she would never betray me.

Liar. Pathetic, lying whore.

She let *him* touch her. Let *him* inside her. Probably got her knees for the one man I'll always despise, who I will never forgive.

She knew how much I hate sharing. And she still did it.

And Yulian-

That smug piece of shit.

He went home straight after we spoke. He had probably just come straight from the bed he fucked her in. He looked straight into the camera as he ruined the only thing I had ever touched.

I feel the rage in my bones, thick and poisonous, crawling under my skin like fire. My vision blurs and my hands shake as my pulse roars in my ears like gunfire. I begin pacing. Fast. Erratic.

I pause.

I need to hit something.

I need to hurt someone.

Reaching my hand toward my desk, I grab the first thing my hand touches. A vase filled with flowers, gifted by none other than my soon to be ex-girlfriend. How fitting.

As hard as I can, I slam it into the wall. It shatters, a satisfying, sharp

crack, pieces skittering across the floor in all directions.

Yet it still isn't enough. Not even close. I need to see them bleed. Rip them apart with my own hands. Break their bones, their ribs, their skin. Crush their throats and hear them beg for my mercy.

I want revenge.

Every second of that video plays in my mind like a slow-motion explosion. Her voice, breathless and eager. Yulian's body moving like he owns her, staring straight at the camera like it means he now owns *me*.

I'm going to kill them.

Camilla. I'll make her regret the moment she opened her legs and gave what was mine to another.

And Yulian. Yulian won't walk away from this. Not this time. I'll wipe that smirk off his face permanently. He'll be six feet in the ground soon enough.

Most of him, anyway. They'll be parts of him never found by the time I'm done.

I'll make it personal. I'll make it loud. I'll make it violent. I'll make it hurt.

And when they scream? When they understand what they have done?

I'll look them dead in the eye. Just like Yulian did to me.

With that, I pick my phone off the ground and call my father. I'll need his help to stay out of prison after I'm done.

-

The shattered pieces of the vase still litter the floor when I hear the knock at the front door. It's firm. Rhythmic. Familiar.

My pulse is still thudding in my ears, and I force myself to breathe, chest expanding like I'm pulling air through smoke. I don't need to check the peephole. I already know it's them. I didn't say much on the phone, just that I was going to do something very bad and needed their help. I'm sure they could feel my rage through the phone, however.

I open the door.

My mother steps in first, her eyes immediately flicking to the shards of broken glass and the jagged smear of red across my knuckles. My father is just behind her, jaw set, hands in his coat pockets. He doesn't say anything, but he doesn't need to. His silence speaks volumes.

"Vaughn," my mother says gently, her voice the kind of soft only mothers can get away with when their sons are on the verge of a bloodbath.

She reaches for me, her hand brushing my arm. I don't pull away, but

I don’t lean into it either.

“What happened?” she asks.

I shake my head, jaw clenched. I don’t have the words yet. Or maybe I do, but they’re buried beneath too much venom and shame. My throat is raw from yelling even though I didn’t make a sound. Just destruction.

My father glances at the mess of my office. His eyes settle on the phone, still lying face-down on the floor like a discarded weapon.

“Pick it up,” he says calmly. “Show me.”

It’s not a request. It’s a test. A reminder that being a leader doesn’t mean falling apart when you’re betrayed, it means keeping your rage sharp, pointed, and quiet until it cuts clean.

I don’t question how he knows the cause is on the phone. He always knows. My father can read me with a single glance. Comes with being a man who sees every angle. Twice.

I bend down and pick up the phone. The screen is cracked now, but it still works. I tap back into the thread and hand it to him without looking. I’ve already seen it enough times to last a lifetime.

He watches the video. He doesn’t react, not visibly. But I know him. I see the faint flicker in his eyes, the twitch in his jaw. My mother watches too, her lips parting in disbelief, then hardening into a grim line.

When it ends, my father hands it back.

“They will pay,” he says.

I nod once. That’s all that’s needed.

My mother exhales slowly, turning away from the wreckage and toward me.

“Sit,” she says.

I do. Because she’s, my mother. Because her tone doesn’t ask.

She sits beside me while my father remains standing, arms crossed. I stare at the floor. I can feel the cuts in my hand now. I hadn’t before. Now the sting registers, dull and ugly, like the rest of me.

“I want them dead,” I whisper.

“We know,” my father replies.

“I want to rip them apart. I want to make it slow.”

“I know.”

“I’m going to kill her.”

Silence.

“No,” my mother says quietly, firmly.

My head jerks toward her, eyes narrowing. “She gave herself to him. She made a fool of me.”

“And you will have revenge for that,” my father says, stepping forward, “but simply killing her isn’t going to go down well with her parents, who we have been in business with for years.

“She made me weak.”

“No,” my mother says, reaching for my hand. “She made you feel. That’s different.”

I laugh, bitter and hollow. “You think that makes it better?”

“No,” she says. “But it means you don’t throw your soul away over a girl who already threw hers away.”

I look at her, really look, and see it in her eyes. She’s not just talking about Camilla. She’s talking about me. She sees the edge I’m on and she’s trying to pull me back.

“You’re a future pakhan,” my father says, his voice cold, controlled.

“You don’t lose your head. You don’t burn the house down because someone broke one of the windows.”

“I want her to hurt.”

“She will,” he replies. “But not like this.”

We sit in silence for a moment. The anger is still there, still simmering beneath my skin, but the flames have dulled. The smoke is clearing.

I wipe my hand on my trousers. Blood stains the fabric.

“I’ll deal with her,” I say. “But I won’t kill her.”

“Good,” my father answers. “That’s the first smart thing you’ve said since we got here.”

“And Yulian?”

He doesn’t answer right away. Then: “You’ll have your revenge. But it will be when it counts. When it breaks him, not just bruises him. Let’s not forget who his father is. Or what his father did to you.”

My mother stands and gently cups my jaw with one hand.

“We’ll handle this,” she says. “But you… you need to remember who you are. You’re not a boy throwing punches anymore. You’re the heir to an empire. So, act like it. By the time we are done with her family,

those hundreds of years of power, money and influence will mean absolutely nothing.

I nod slowly.

Both my parents hug me. One after the other. They've never withheld love, not even in our world. Especially after the kidnapping, I don't think I've ever seen my father lose his temper like that.

The rage isn't gone. It never will be. But it's buried now, curled up behind my ribs like a coiled serpent. Waiting.

They help me sweep the glass into a pile, pack a few of my things, demanding for me to stay with them for at least a few days. My father steps away to make a call. I suspect he is already putting plans in motion.

Camilla and her family will have to come first. That's okay. They have not only humiliated me but my parents as well and so their suffering must be prioritised.

As we move out of my building and to the car, however, I allow myself a moment to consider the other person who was involving in shattering my entire world.

Yulian told me we were playing his game. After that move from him, I suppose it's my turn. It's time to move my own pieces. If I can't kill Yulian today, I'll make sure he bleeds in ways he never sees coming.

-

I’m sat on my bed in parents’ house when I hear her arrive.

She shows up like nothing’s wrong. Hair done. Lipstick perfect. Designer heels clicking across the marble floor of my parents' home like she belongs here. The synchronised tapping as she walks up the stairs toward me, no idea what she is about to walk into.

She doesn’t belong here anymore.

“Vaughn?” she calls, stepping into my room as she has done a thousand times before, arms crossed. My heart is beating like a war drum. “Is something wrong? You sounded off.”

I texted her, rather than call. I didn’t trust myself to keep calm enough for her not to run on the phone, so I kept myself restrained to messages that were short and to the point. A little off for me, but not obviously so.

I turn slowly, look at her like I’m seeing a stranger. “You’re going to stand there and lie to my face? Act like nothing is wrong at all?”

She blinks. Confused. Or pretending to be. “What are you talking about?”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about.” My voice is low. Controlled.

For now.

She laughs. A weak, breathy sound. “Vaughn, you’re scaring me.”

“Good.”

I toss the phone onto the bed in front of her, face up. The screen’s still lit. The video queued.

Her eyes follow it, and the colour drains from her face. She takes a step forward. “That’s not-”

“Don’t.” My voice cracks like a whip. “Don’t insult my intelligence.”

Her mouth opens. Closes. Opens again. “Who sent you that?” she whispers.

I don’t answer. I don’t need to.

Instead, I step closer. “Was it fun?” I ask. “Did he make you laugh, charm you? Or did it not even take that. Just one look and you were ready to betray me. Did you think I’d never find out?”

“I-” she chokes on the words, blinking hard. “It wasn’t like that, Vaughn, I didn’t mean for it to happen-”

“Spare me the clichés.” I roll my eyes angrily.

Tears spill over, quick and messy. “I’m so sorry, V! Please. I am begging you. It was one mistake, I swear it’ll never happen again. I already promised myself. I just need that one night and now-”

“Oh, you just *needed* it, did you!” I scream.

“No, no, no!” she repeats over and over, spiralling now. “Please. It’s complicated, but it’s done now. It won’t happen again. Never, ever.”

“Are you serious right now? You honestly think I’ll take you back after this?”

She falls to her knees in sobs, her mascara pouring down her face. “V, I’m sorry. I’m so, so, so sorry.”

I scoff at her act. “I can’t believe I was *worried* about you that night. Thinking that he had got those earrings by breaking into your apartment, when he had taken them right from your willing body. Were you even in your place once that night? Or were you in his bed when I called, telling you to spend the night at mine so he can’t get to you.”

She breaks down harder, giving me the answer I already knew.

“You are pathetic. I gave you everything-”

She shoots back up from the floor. Her face morphs to rage. “Bullshit! I was lonely! You wouldn’t let me go to university. You kept me here like a-a- like a doll on a shelf-”

“Wouldn’t let you go to university? The fuck are you talking about? You’re at university right now!”

“Yes, but not the one I wanted to go to. The Kings U! All our friends are there, but no, you wouldn’t go because of *him*. Always fucking *him*. So, I was stuck here.”

I actually go silent for a moment in shock. “Are you kidding me right now? You cheated on me with my worst enemy, the person who actually caused this whole problem your claiming is the reason you fucked another guy, because you didn’t get to you to the University you wanted to go to? Are you serious right now?”

“Yes! I am serious!”

“Camilla, people don’t get to go to their preferred university all the damn time. But they don’t use it as an excuse to cheat on their boyfriend!”

“You don’t get it. I have to watch and listen to everyone we know having fun without me every day.”

“And that justifies screwing my enemy?”

“He was there! He listened to me!”

“Oh, I’m sure he listened real well, especially with your legs around his waist and face buried in his neck.”

She flinches like I slapped her. “You don’t understand-”

“No! You don’t understand.” The words rip from my throat, raw and violent. “I gave you everything. Regardless of if you will admit it. I protected you. I trusted you. I would have given you a life most people only ever dream of. All you had to do was show some fucking loyalty.”

Her faces panics at my words being past tense, as if she is realising just how much she screwed up. How much she now has to face the consequences of her own actions. “I made a mistake!”

“You made a choice.” I’m shouting now. Loud enough to shake the walls. Loud enough that I know my parents can hear me downstairs. I don’t care.

She tries to reach for me. I jerk away.

“Vaughn, please, please, I love you-”

Its ridiculous. The way she is switching between apologising to me to blaming me back to begging me. “You don’t love me.” My voice drops to a whisper. Cold. Final. “You loved what I gave you. The safety. The power. The name.”

“That’s not true-!”

“You humiliated me,” I snap. “You made me a joke.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you,” she cries, dropping to her knees once again. It just feels like we are going in circles. “Please, just give me another chance. I’ll fix it, I’ll do anything, just-just please-”

I stare down at her, trembling with fury. My fists clench at my sides. One move, and I could end this. End her.

For a second, I want to.

But then I see my mother’s face in my head. My father’s voice telling me not to burn the house down because someone broke a window.

I breathe. Just once. A single inhale. Shaky.

“Get up,” I growl.

She doesn’t move.

“I said get the fuck up!”

She scrambles to her feet, sobbing. “Vaughn, don’t do this. Please. I’ll make it right, just tell me what to do-”

“Leave,” I say. “Before I do something I can’t undo.”

She hesitates, searching my face like there’s still hope left.

There isn't.

"I'm sorry," she whispers. "I was stupid. I thought- I didn't think I'd lose you."

"You didn't lose me," I say. "You threw me away."

She stares at me for a second longer. Then turns and runs out.

After a moment, I follow her down the stairs, stopping behind the door as I hear her grab her things, only to hear two sets of footsteps approach her.

My parents.

I don't hear every word, but I hear her begging. "I can fix this," she pleads. "Please, just-just tell him to give me another chance. Please. I made a mistake, I love him. Sasha please-"

She ignores her. "Go home, Camilla."

And my father, quiet and cruel: "You'd best go to your parents. What's coming next will ruin them. Best get them prepared."

I hear her start begging again, but she quickly shuts up. My parents don't say another word, so I imagine the look they must have given her. I imagine her face too, confusion twisting into fear.

And then the door slams shut behind her.

Good. Let her be afraid. Because this isn't over. This is only the beginning.

-

Yulian

-

It's a full house tonight, the party humming with the steady bass of music and the low murmur of conversation. The ballroom is awash in soft golden light, reflecting off the glasses of champagne and crystal chandeliers. Girls in designer dresses and guys in suits and tuxedos mix and mingle, the scent of expensive perfume and alcohol thick in the air. The entire scene is nothing short of lavish corruption, just how I like it.

I swirl my drink lazily, my eyes scanning the crowd as I lean back against the marble column. A few girls have been eyeing me all night, throwing flirty glances my way, waiting for an invitation. They don't have to wait long.

One of them, a brunette in a short red dress, sidles up to me with a sultry smile. She's beautiful, in that predictable way, flawless skin, pouty lips, perfect curves, but as she makes her move, I'm already losing interest. She slides her hand up my arm, her perfume overpowering.

"Hey, Yulian. I was thinking we could continue this party somewhere a bit more... private?" she purrs, her voice dripping with suggestion.

I glance down at her, offering a lazy smirk. She's eager, too eager. They always are. "Tempting," I say, my voice smooth, "but I've got a few things to take care of first. Maybe later."

Her smile falters for a split second, but she recovers quickly, stepping back with a light laugh as if I've just told her a joke. "Alright, I'll hold you to that."

She walks away, hips swaying with extra emphasis, but I'm already scanning the crowd again. Another girl catches my eye near the piano, blonde and wide-eyed, all curves and soft touches. She makes her move before I do.

"You're Yulian, right?" she says, brushing her fingers against my chest. "The heir?"

I lean in, lips brushing close to her ear. "That depends. Are you looking for the heir, or the man?"

She laughs, overly charmed. We dance through a few flirtatious lines, the usual routine.

"You know," she purrs, "we could go upstairs. Get away from all this noise."

I smile, sharp and lazy. "Tempting," I say, even though it isn't. "But I'm hosting. Would be rude to leave my own party."

She pouts, trying for sultry. It lands somewhere closer to bratty. Unfortunately, I think bratty is more my thing.

It’s not that I don’t want to fuck. God knows I do. But none of them feel like enough. None of them are him.

There’s a part of me that enjoys the attention, who wouldn’t? But the truth is, it never goes anywhere. They never go anywhere. And I don’t really want them to.

My eyes land on someone else. Annie.

Now, she’s a different story.

Annie is standing by the bar, laughing at something with a group of people, her confidence radiating in a way that’s impossible to ignore. She’s stunning, in a way that has nothing to do with how little she’s wearing or how much makeup she has on. It’s in the way she carries herself, the sharpness of her eyes, the intelligence in her smile.

Her olive skin shines almost golden against the low lighting, while her thick, dark hair matches her wide eyes. Red and full, her perfect lips are bold against her pearly teeth.

I make my way over, smoothly sliding in beside her, and she acknowledges me without missing a beat, those sharp eyes flicking over me with a knowing smile.

"Yulian," she says, her tone casual but playful, "I wondered when you’d finally make your way over here."

"I was saving the best for last," I reply, leaning on the bar next to her.

"You’re not an easy one to miss."

She raises an eyebrow, the corner of her mouth quirking upward. "Flattery, huh? Not sure if that works on me."

I grin. "Wouldn’t dream of trying to impress you. You don’t seem like the type that’s easily impressed."

"You’re right." She sips her drink, her eyes never leaving mine. "But I’m curious. Why keep flirting with all these girls when we both know you’re not going to take them upstairs?"

I chuckle, running a hand through my hair. "You’ve been paying attention, I see."

"Always," she replies smoothly. "I’ve seen the way you move. You’re playing a game, and not with the girls."

I like that she can read me, that she’s not taken in by the charm. Annie knows the score, she always does. She’s ambitious, sharp, and, most importantly, loyal. Qualities I respect. And unlike the others, she knows exactly who I am and still chooses to stand beside me.

"So, what game am I playing?" I ask, tilting my head, curious to hear her take.

She leans in slightly, her voice lowering, though her expression stays teasing. "You’re keeping your options open, pretending to enjoy the chase when really, you already know exactly what you’re after."

A laugh escapes me, short and genuine. "You think I'm pretending?"

She shrugs, taking another sip of her drink, clearly unfazed by my response. "I think you're avoiding something. Or someone."

It's subtle, but I feel my jaw tighten. Her insight cuts closer to the truth than I'm willing to admit, but I don't let it show. Instead, I grin, the mask slipping back into place. "Maybe I just haven't found anyone worth taking upstairs tonight."

"Maybe," she replies, her eyes glittering with amusement. "Or maybe you've found someone you can't."

She's playing with fire, and we both know it. But that's what makes her fun. There's no pretense with Annie, no false promises. She knows what this is, and so do I.

"I like you, Annie," I say, my tone easy but sincere. "You don't waste time with nonsense."

"Never," she says, smiling. "And I like you, too, Yulian. But we both know this isn't going anywhere."

She's right, of course. It won't go anywhere, and it never was meant to. But that doesn't mean I don't enjoy our moments together.

Annie glances around the party, then back at me. "I think I'll go find someone a little less... complicated." Her eyes catch on a very handsome looking man across the room as she flashes me a grin, finishing the last of her drink. "But this has been fun, as always."

I smirk, watching as she stands to leave. "Good luck."

She leans in briefly, her lips brushing my cheek in a friendly, almost affectionate gesture. "You know I don't need it."

I watch her disappear into the crowd, her confidence trailing behind her like a second skin. She's a force, no doubt about it. I like her ambition, her drive. She'll go far, and she knows it.

As will I. I'll go as far as can be, all the way to the top and I won't have a choice. Not that I'd turn it down if I did. The very idea that I'll spend the rest of my life making people bleed gets me all excited.

Annie's gone now, wrapped around some guy who doesn't care if she bites when she kisses. And for a second, I envy her.

Not for the guy. For the freedom.

She takes what she wants. Unapologetically. She doesn't hide behind masks or excuses. She fucks who she wants, works for what she wants, and doesn't seem to feel the guilt I carry like a second skin. She exists without shame.

And me? I flirt like I mean it, then ghost like a coward. I crave touch and connection, but nothing satisfies, because the only person I want to touch would rather stab me than speak to me.

Don't get me wrong, that's one of my favourite things about him. When I get him in my bed (and I will) I can't wait for him to hold his

favourite knife to my throat. I can feel myself harden at just the idea of it. Pretty sure he has a thing for chains too. Will definitely need to have a discussion about incorporating those sometime.

Might have to wait a bit though. Just until after he gets over the I-fucked-his-girlfriend-thing.

Anyway, I slip away from the party, climbing the stairs two at a time until I'm in the dim corridor that leads to my room. The music is muffled here, the air thicker, quieter. I sink onto my bed and stare at my phone for a minute.

I shouldn't.

But I do.

I open our thread. Vaughn never answers, of course. Not even the video of me and Camilla. But I still send them. It's not about the replies, it's about getting under his skin.

And maybe because watching him unravel in my head is the only thing that feels real right now.

My fingers hover for half a second before I type:

Hey, just wanted to check in. How's your night going? Mine's great, Camilla says hi 😈

Pause. Then another.

She's got this thing she does with her tongue, real talent, that girl. You clearly taught her well. Proud of you, Mishka.

I don't even know if that's true. She didn't put her tongue on any part of me during our night together. I grin, wicked and sharp. My heart's pounding now, and I can't tell if it's adrenaline or something more pathetic.

I keep going:

Anyway, let me know if you want her back. As you know, she is missing a pair of earrings, but I'm pretty sure she's still wearing your necklace. Not emotionally, obviously. That went out the window along with her panties.

I send it. No hesitation.

Then I toss the phone across the bed like I'm not waiting. Like I don't care.

(Like I'm not dying to see those little gray dots appear just once.)

But they won't. They never do.

And yet, I keep texting him.

Because for all his silence, I know him. I know that rage. I know that itch under the skin. The kind of fury that eats at your bones and

makes you want to set the world on fire just to feel something.

We're not so different, Vaughn and I.

Except when I set fires, I smile through the smoke.

-

My limbs sprawl out across the silk sheets around me, one arm slung over my face as the muffled base of the party pulses through the floorboards. A knock sounds at the door.

I don't move. "Unless it's worth me getting up for, go away."

"It might be," comes Mikhail's voice, smooth and amused. Some chick is crying at the door for you, says her name is Camilla."

My mouth curves into a smirk. I sit up, my tousled hair falling over my face, and meet Mikhail's gaze with lazy interest. "Camilla?"

Mikhail nods. "Odd coincidence. Isn't Morozov's girlfriend called Camilla? It couldn't possibly be the same one, could it?" He says it questioningly, but he already knows the answer.

I grin at him. "Well, as a matter of fact, my friend, I think it just might be."

Now I did not see this coming. How very interesting.

Mikhail's mouth curves on one side before he raises a brow. "Want me to stay?"

He doesn't ask whether or not to let her in. He already knows the answer, it comes with knowing each other for so long.

I shake my head. "I'll be fine."

"You got it, boss." Mikhail disappears and a minute later, Camilla storms in like a hurricane of designer heels and smeared mascara.

"You filmed us?" she screams, voice cracking. "Are you insane?"

I lean back against the headboard, unbothered. "Good evening to you too, darling." I put on a slight British accent I've managed to pick up after being surrounded by all these posh twats. She doesn't seem impressed by it.

"You filmed it!" Camilla accuses, shaking with fury. "And you sent it to him!"

She is getting very worked up now. Perhaps its time to take a different approach.

"Cami…" I begin. "I swear I have no idea what you are talking about. I didn't film anything. I was staying in a hotel room, remember? Someone must have planted a camera."

“Don’t lie to me!” she sobs. “You sent it to him on purpose.”

“No, I didn’t,” I lie easily. “I would never embarrass you like that.”

Her face crumples, her fury turning into grief. “He dumped me,” she says brokenly. “Vaughn dumped me, Yulian. My parents are ruined. Their company is falling apart as part of his parents’ revenge. They disowned me. *Disowned* me.”

My heart thunders in my chest at her revelation. Vaughn dumped her. Of course he did, there are few things he hates more than sharing. Her actions were unforgivable. This is perfect.

I tilt my head sympathisingly. “That’s harsh.”

Her eyes rove over me, like an idea is forming in her head. She crosses the room, sitting on the end of my bed. “Please…please, help me. I don’t have anyone else. Vaughn and his family hate me. My parents disowned me. My sister is happy to be our parents favourite.”

She ducks her head and blinks slowly at me. “I liked you, I really liked you. I know you like me too.”

What a naïve little bitch.

My smile remains in place, though my eyes cool.

“We could be something, you and me,” she says quietly, crawling toward me on the bed. “I can transfer to this University. You know I

always wanted to go. We can be together."

I let her lean into me for a moment, considering my options. I stroke her hair once.

She'll die tonight; that's for sure. But how to do it?

"You shouldn't have cheated on him," I whisper.

She freezes, her head turning toward me slowly.

"You shouldn't have lied to him. You shouldn't have betrayed him. You shouldn't have hurt him. Don't you know I'm the only person allowed to hurt him?"

Camilla shifts back, blinking. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm going to kill you," I say gently, voice calm. "For what you did to him."

She laughs, half-hysterical. "What?"

"I'm serious." I smile at her, though there is nothing soft in it this time. "You hurt my Mishka. That's unforgivable."

"You're joking." Her voice pitches higher. "You're actually joking."

I tilt my head at her. “Do I look like I’m joking?”

She stares at me. Then, slowly, her expression twists, like she is coming to a realisation.

“Oh my god,” she breathes, her mouth curved in a perfect ‘O’. “You’re in love with him.”

Fury races through me and I grab her by the throat, but not hard enough to cut off her breathing.

“You’re in love with Vaughn,” she repeats, voice rising with horror and hint of amusement. As if she’s truly lost it now, she scoffs and laughs a little. “That’s why you have done this. Why you have been so obsessed with him all these years. Why you sent him videos, why you fucked with our relationship,”

“*You* fucked with your relationship when you cheated on him,” I snarl at her.

“With *you*,” she throws back at me. “Whatever hopes or dreams you have about the two of you, destroy them now. After what you’ve done, you’ll be lucky he doesn’t slaughter you with his bare hands.”

That lifts my mood back up again slightly. The second part actually sounds quite fun.

“Ever since what happened between you when you were kids, when he was kidnapped, you’re sick-”

My grip on her throat tightens, but not enough to completely cut her off.

“He won’t ever forgive you for it. He despises you because of it. You tell me about betrayal when you betrayed him first.”

I don’t know what the fuck she is talking about, but she knows nothing about what happened between Vaughn and I when we were young. Only we could ever understand.

She continues, a smirk gracing her lips, like she knows how much she is damaging me right now. “He’ll never love you back, you know,” she spits, eyes gleaming. “Not the way he loved me. Not like that. You’re a freak and he knows it. He will never forgive you for what you did. You are a pathetic, obsessed little freak who’s going to die alone-”

She doesn’t get to finish.

I snap her neck before she even has the chance to scream.

Oops. I had wanted to make it more painful than that. More drawn out. A lot more of her blood on display. Oh well. At least she is no longer around to hurt my Mishka.

I lay back on the bed, breathing steady, staring at the lifeless body beside me. I close my eyes.

“Sorry, Camilla. But only I get to put my hands on him and live to tell the tale.”

I picture the rage, heartbreak, betrayal that must have been on Vaughn's face when he first saw the video.

I smile, knowing the cause of that pain is now gone. By my hand. Aren't I so good to him?

-

Mikhail walks in a few minutes later, presumably concerned by the lack of screaming. He doesn't even flinch when he sees the dead body beside me, just sighs and rolls his eyes. He doesn't hesitate to tell me he is going to clear out the mansion so we can safely dispose of the body without being caught.

This is why he is my right-hand man. He's great, he really is.

We move silently and efficiently, setting up the scene. It must be perfect. She said her parents disowned her, but there is still a good chance they will want answers.

Plus, my Mishka may want to do some investigating himself if he isn't totally convinced. He despises her now, sure, but he has known her a long time.

Ugh.

Once we are finished, I settle back in my bed. Pretty sure the Heathens have their yearly little initiation ceremony coming up. Mishka always comes over for it.

Guess I'll see him soon, then.

-

Vaughn

-

I'm sat at the desk in my room when a knock comes at the door.

It's been a tiring few days, destroying Camilla and her family. Their company is done for. Centuries of work diminished in days. They'll never be invited to another social event again.

Her parents have disowned Camilla, too. It was their attempt to mend the bridges between our families. Then they offered their younger daughter to marry me instead. But we are too far gone for that. Being disowned is a good start, but I'm not finished with Camilla yet. Two years of my life down the drain. She's not even started being punished yet.

Last I heard she had run away to the island, probably to beg our mutual friends for help. She won't get any. Even if they weren't terrified of my family and the prospect of losing their families reputation, they always preferred me anyway.

"Come in," I call.

I don't turn my back to see who it is, but judging by the footsteps, its my father.

“Hey dad,” I say.

He doesn’t reply. I give him a moment yet hear nothing. I turn to face him and draw in a sharp breath at his face. His jaw is clenched, and he looks frustrated. “What’s wrong,” I ask as I stand and walk toward him.

He takes me by the shoulder and guides me to my bed, gently pushing me to sit down on it. He sits beside me, keeping his hand on my shoulder as a comforting presence. I feel nerves itch at my skin. It’s rare I see my father so vulnerable.

“Son…” he starts.

He lifts his head to look me in the eye.

“Camilla killed herself yesterday.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed that. It has been a few days since i wrote it but i think im starting to properly flesh out the characters and help you get an understanding of their personalities.

thank you again for any comments, they are very motivating haha. I try to reply to every comment that isnt a FAQ, as instead ill just respond in the notes of the next chapter, or if im worried i might spoil something in the reply.

i have work tomorrow and then im with family at the weekend for mothers day. the chapter is already written, but not the flashback. ill aim to get it out before work tomorrow, but if i dont, it probably wont be until sunday or maybe even monday.

:D

Chapter Four

Chapter Notes

its a little later than i said, i know, my bad. but please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

-

Eight Years Ago

Yulian

-

I watch him in the dim light, my breath shallow, my fingers twitching at my sides. Vaughn is curled against the far wall, wary as ever, but he looks weaker than before. He's still trying to hide it, still holding himself tall, still glaring at me like he can set me on fire with sheer willpower, but I can see the way his hands tremble slightly, the way his lips are just a bit too pale.

And then there are the bruises.

Deep, dark things littering his arms, peeking from beneath the collar of his too-thin pajama shirt. I catch a glimpse of his wrists, rubbed raw where the ropes must have been tied too tight, and something inside me burns.

I should have expected this, of course. My father isn't a kind man. But seeing the evidence of it, seeing someone else's marks on Vaughn, on what's mine, makes my stomach twist.

He doesn't belong to them. He doesn't belong to anyone.

Except me.

The thought slides into my mind so naturally it doesn't even shock me. He's mine. They don't get to touch him. They don't get to hurt him. That's my right.

And yet, they have.

I inhale slowly, pushing the anger down. It won't do me any good right now.

When I emerge into the basement, the dim lighting barely illuminates Vaughn's form, curled up against the farthest wall. He looks up at me, the flicker of the light casting sharp shadows across his face, sharpening his scowl.

"You again," he mutters.

"Me again," I echo cheerfully, stepping closer. "I brought you something."

He eyes the plate with barely disguised hunger, but he doesn't move, doesn't reach out for it. Stubborn. He always is.

"Food," I say. "It's a little stale, I had to make it this morning and then hide it until tonight, but it's still better than nothing."

His lips press into a firm line.

I sigh, crouching in front of him, setting the plate between us. “You know, I don’t have to do this.”

He glares. “Then don’t.”

I roll my eyes, nudging the plate slightly closer to him. He waits a moment longer before finally grabbing a piece of bread and tearing into it with sharp, efficient bites.

I watch, fascinated. It’s strange. I’ve seen hungry people before. I’ve seen desperation. But Vaughn? He doesn’t just eat like someone who’s starving, he eats like someone refusing to let his hunger be a weakness.

“You don’t talk much, do you?” I say, sitting cross-legged on the cold floor.

“Not to people like you.”

I grin. “People like me?”

“Kidnappers.”

“Technically, I’m not the one who kidnapped you.”

“You’re still his son.”

That makes my grin widen. “So you do know who I am.”

Vaughn doesn't answer, but his silence is enough.

"So…what's it like?" I ask.

"What's what like?"

"Being you. Being Vaughn Morozov."

He chews slower, eyes narrowing slightly. "Why do you care?"

I shrug, leaning forward. "Because you're interesting."

"No, I'm not."

I huff a quiet laugh. "You are to me."

For the first time, something flickers across his face, confusion, maybe. He doesn't understand me. No one ever does. But he doesn't look away, either.

I shift, pulling my knees up to my chest. "Do you have any siblings?"

"No."

"Really? That's kinda sad."

Vaughn scoffs. “I have cousins. They’re basically my siblings.”

“Cousins don’t count.”

“They do when they’re raised with you,” he counters. “I have a cousin my age. She’s like a sister to me.”

“What’s she like?”

“Loud.”

I smirk. “I like her already.”

“She’s nosy. And she gets into fights she can’t win.”

“Oh, I really like her.”

He huffs, shaking his head. “And then there’s my other cousins, not biological, but the their-parents-are-called-my-aunts-and-uncles-kind, my best friends, really.”

I listen as he talks, as he describes the people in his life, the ones who shaped him. His voice isn’t as guarded as before. He doesn’t realize it, but he’s opening up, little by little. And I drink it all in, every word, every tiny piece of him that he lets slip through his walls.

“What about you?” he asks suddenly. “Do you have siblings?”

I pause, tilting my head. “Yeah. A sister.”

“What’s she like?”

“She’s…different from me.” I hesitate, rolling my sleeve up absentmindedly. “She’s softer. I think she wants to be free, but she doesn’t know how.”

Vaughn studies me. “You talk like you know how.”

I smile, slow and sharp. “Maybe I do.”

He doesn’t respond, but I can tell he’s thinking about it. I can tell he’s thinking about me.

And I like it.

I like it a lot.

I settle in, ready to stay as long as I can. Ready to listen, to learn, to soak up every little piece of Vaughn Morozov like he’s something to be memorized. Because he is. Because I want to know everything about him.

Because I think I might never want to stop.

-

Present Day

Vaughn

-

The jet roars beneath me, a low hum vibrating through my bones as I settle into the window seat. Leather creaks beneath my fingers. I don't look up when someone offers me a drink. I just wave them off and stare out at the runway as it blurs into the horizon.

I'm heading to the UK now, ready for the upcoming initiation. It'll be nice to see my friends, I haven't in a while.

It's been a week. Seven days of silence and whispers. Seven days since Camilla decided to beat me to it.

She's dead.

No grand reckoning. No vengeance soaked in fire and blood. No final scream or tearful confession. Just a neatly written note and a bottle of pills.

I should feel something more... final. Instead, there's just a hollow buzz under my skin, a tight knot in my throat that I keep swallowing back. My jaw's been clenched for days. I don't know how to unclench it.

I wanted to kill her.

And now that I can't, now that she took that from me, I feel like a

balloon someone punctured. Not enough of a wound to burst, just enough to hiss out slowly.

Coward, I think. Over and over. She didn't even have the guts to face me.

But then I remember her laugh. Her perfume. The way she used to throw popcorn at me during movie nights, or how she opened up and became her true self when we were in private.

I loved her. For two years, I loved her. Hell, longer than that. I might not have been *in* love with her, but I did love her. We grew up together, distant memories and awkward teenage crushes. She knew me better than most.

And I knew her.

Or I thought I did.

Now I can't stop thinking about her lying cold and alone in that room. Wondering if she was scared. Wondering if she thought of me, of how I'd feel.

What am I talking about. Of course, she thought of me. She did it because of me, because of what she did to me. It's a complex thing to deal with. Balancing with the idea that my girlfriend cheated on me, then killed herself because I ruined her life over it.

My hand tightens around the armrest. It's too late for revenge now. Too late to scream. Too late to hate her the way I want to.

Too late for everything.

The pilot announces take-off. My stomach drops with the lurch of the plane, but it's nothing compared to the heaviness pressing into my chest.

I rest my head back against the seat, but sleep doesn't come. All I can think about is how close I'm going to be to him.

Yulian.

The name is poison in my mouth, even when I don't say it out loud. I haven't seen him since Camilla died. Since the message came through. No smug text. No taunt. No cryptic video this time. Nothing.

And somehow, that's worse.

He's letting me stew in it. Letting me imagine all the ways he's smiling to himself, revelling in the chaos he created. Because I know he had a hand in it, even if he didn't tell her to do it. Even if he didn't put the pills in her hand, he pushed her there. He broke her down. Manipulated her. He has always been good at lying.

All she had to do was not fall for his tricks. To stay loyal to me. She was mine. Sure, that sounds pretty toxic and possessive, but I don't care, she was mine. My person. My tether to something normal.

And Yulian tore her out of my life like it meant nothing.

He’s always taken things that don’t belong to him. He does it without blinking, like he was born to. That whole smug, serpentine aura, like he’s always five steps ahead and laughing at the rest of us for trying to keep up.

I don’t care what it takes. I’ll make him pay. He thinks he’s untouchable because he’s surrounded by his people. Because his family is powerful like my own. But he’s wrong. My family told me to forget about her. She betrayed me and doesn’t deserve my thoughts. I should let it go. Grieve.

Grieve?

I don’t even know what grief looks like anymore.

But I know what revenge feels like. And I know it’s the only thing that keeps my hands from shaking.

This island? It’s going to be his cage.

And I’ll be the one holding the key.

Let him laugh. Let him try to get inside my head like he always does. I’m done pretending I don’t want to hurt him. Let’s see how clever he is when he’s the one being hunted.

-

The moment I step off the plane, Jeremy is the first person I see, scrolling through his phone with an air of indifference, as if he has a million better things to do. Beside him, Killian leans against the limo, looking way too smug for my liking. Gareth checks his watch with the kind of exasperation that suggests I've already tested his patience, and Nikolai, predictably, has disappeared.

"Finally," Killian drawls, pushing off the limo as I approach. "We have been waiting here for hours."

Behind him, Jeremy subtly shakes his head at me, silently saying, *he is exaggerating*.

I huff a laugh, shaking my head. "Sure, you have. Well, my deepest apologies for keeping you waiting."

Jeremy pockets his phone and nods in greeting. "Long flight?"

Killian nods his head at me. "Yeah, that was a long-ass flight. You look like shit."

"Thanks." I direct my attention back to Jeremy.

"Could've been worse." I answer his question, rolling my shoulders. "Where's Nikolai?"

"Security," Gareth replies flatly. "Don't worry, I already sorted him out."

I sigh, rubbing a hand over my face. “What now?”

“Well,” Gareth continues, “he saw a ‘Restricted Access’ sign and took it as a personal challenge.”

“Wasn’t much of a challenge,” Nikolai calls out, finally strolling up from behind me, looking unbothered as ever.

Jeremy sighs like a disappointed parent. “How bad was it?”

“Oh, not bad at all.” Nikolai waves a dismissive hand. “Just a couple of confused security guards. Some yelling. A minor chase. I made it out just fine.”

“That is *not* what I meant,” Jeremy sighs.

We quickly clamber into the limo afterwards. Usually we would take normal cars (albeit with extra safety precautions) but this time we wanted to ensure that we could sit together, as its most likely we will have to get straight to planning the initiation once we get to the mansion, and we wanted to catch up a bit first.

As soon as the doors shut, Gareth lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Alright," he says, rubbing his temples. "We’ve made it this far without any major disasters. Can we please behave like civilized human beings for the duration of this drive?"

There’s a beat of silence. Then Nikolai and Killian immediately exchange a look.

“No,” they say in perfect unison.

Gareth groans. "Why do I even bother?"

"Because you love us," Nikolai says smugly, sprawling across his seat like he owns the place.

"I tolerate you," Gareth corrects.

"A distinction without a difference," Killian quips.

Jeremy clears his throat. "Guys can we please-"

He's cut off by the sound of plastic crinkling.

All eyes turn to Nikolai, who is now pulling a large bag from under his seat.

"What the hell is that?" I ask.

"My snacks," he says casually, like this is normal.

Killian perks up. "Oh, hell yes. What do you have?"

Nikolai starts rummaging. "Let’s see… Monster Munch, Skittles, cookies, macrons, but those are for me-"

"You absolute maniac," Gareth interrupts. "You had time to evade security *and* go grocery shopping?"

Nikolai grins. "Multitasking."

Killian grabs a packet of crisps and rips it open. "You know what cousin, you're not so bad sometimes."

Jeremy grits his teeth as the loudest possible snacks are opened around him. "Couldn't you have picked something quieter?"

Killian throws him a single granola bar. "Here. For your old man heart."

Jeremy catches it with a deadpan expression. "This is expired."

"Fits you perfectly then."

I shake my head as I watch Gareth physically restrain himself from murdering Nikolai, who is crunching loudly on two separate snack items at once.

"Alright, that's it," Gareth finally snaps, snatching the bag away from Niko and throwing it onto the other seat.

"Hey!" Niko protests. "I risked my life for that bag."

"Risked your life?"

Niko nods solemnly. "An old lady was eyeing the last pack of macrons. I had to act fast."

Jeremy rolls his eyes. "Really now?"

"It was brutal," Niko continues, shaking his head. "We made eye contact. She reached first, but I had speed on my side. I even threatened to beat her with that stick she was using, but she didn't even care. Old people have no respect for the younger generation, I tell you."

Gareth pinches the bridge of his nose. "I hate all of you."

"You love us," Killian corrects, stealing a cookie from the bag.

Gareth leans back against his seat, exhaling like he's just aged ten years. "We're never making it to the house in one piece, are we?"

"Not a chance," I say dryly.

And somehow, despite everything, I feel lighter than I have in days.

-

I sit on the edge of my bed in my room. It isn't used often, for obvious reasons, but its always here when I need it. I hold a glass of scotch in

my hand, though I haven't taken a sip yet. It feels a little odd that it isn't illegal for me to have this, to drink it, to even buy it, not here.

I don't know why I even bothered to pour it. I'm pretty sure I'm not going to drink it. It isn't going to make the rage burn less or the frustration settle.

A knock on the door breaks my chain of thought. I don't say anything and the door opens anyway, like I knew it would.

Jeremy steps inside, shutting the door behind him. "I knew you weren't sleeping."

I let out a humourless laugh. "And what gave it away?"

Jeremy leans against my dresser, crossing his arms. "You've been off since you got here."

"We're all a little off."

"Not like this."

My jaw clenches as my fingers tighten around the glass.

Jeremy waits. He always does, giving me time, space and whatever else I need. It's annoyingly mature. But then again, he is the eldest of our group, so perhaps it comes with the position.

Besides, it's also why he is the only member of our group who I would probably ever open up to. I exhale through my nose and set the glass down, running my other hand through my hair.

"It's Camila." Even her name feels like poison in my mouth.

To his credit, Jeremy's face doesn't change. He just nods. "What happened?"

"She cheated on me." The words still feel slightly foreign in my mouth, like they don't belong there. My jaw starts to ache from how much I've been clenching it.

Jeremy's expression darkens slightly as he straightens himself up. "Who?"

I let out a sharp, bitter laugh. "Yulian."

A beat of silence. Jeremy blinks once.

Then- "*What*?"

I smile without humour, shaking my head. "Oh, it gets worse." I turn my head to finally look at Jeremy. "He filmed it."

Jeremy's face barely changes, but I know him well enough to see the flicker of something, anger, disbelief, beneath the surface.

“He sent it to you,” Jeremy guesses.

“Of course, he did.” I lean back, bracing my hands against the mattress. “Wanted to make sure I got the full experience, I suppose.”

Jeremy exhales slowly, like he is reigning something in. He is one of the most controlled people I know, but even he looks like he wants to punch something.

I wished I could say I feel numb. That the anger has burned out. But it hasn’t. It has just settled. Deep in my bones.

"I broke up with her," I said flatly. "Obviously.”

I don’t know why I don’t tell him she is dead. That she killed herself because of what I did. *What she did*.

That’s what my dad keeps telling me. She didn’t kill herself because of what I did, but because of what she did. If she hadn’t cheated in the first place, I wouldn’t have had to resort to ruining her. I didn’t even go as far as I wanted to before she was already dead.

Yet, I still keep her suicide a secret. I don’t want to admit it, but a small smidge of guilt remains in me. I have no doubt Jeremy wouldn’t blame me, nor would anyone else. They’d simply say good riddance and carry on. But I still can’t make myself do it.

Jeremy studies me for a moment. “And you’ve been dealing with that how, exactly?”

“I ruined her. And her parents, and their company.”

Jeremy nods his head in approval. “And what about him?”

I don’t answer right away.

Then, quietly, “I’m going to kill him.”

Jeremy sighs, rubbing his temple. “Vaughn-”

“I mean it,” I declare, standing up, pacing to the window. “This isn’t something I can just let go. He’s been playing with me for years, and now he thinks he can humiliate me?” My fingers curl into fists. “I won’t let him get away with it.”

Jeremy is silent for a moment. When he finally speaks, his voice is measured. “And you won’t. But you’re angry. You absolutely have every right to be. But rushing into something reckless isn’t going to fix it.”

I turn to face him. “Then what do you suggest I do? Just let him keep laughing at me?”

“No,” Jeremy says simply. “But I do suggest you don’t let him control your every move.”

I scoff at that. “I’m not-”

“Aren’t you?” Jeremy meets my eyes evenly. “He’s been pulling at your strings for years. So far, you have been good at keeping away from him. Ignoring his messages, staying in New York. Don’t flip out now.”

“That’s why I need to end it, though. This has been happening for years and I’m fed up of being the bigger person. I want it to stop. I want revenge. I want him dead.”

Jeremy exhales, watching me carefully. “Is that the only reason you’re thinking about transferring?”

My body goes still. How does he know? I hadn’t planned to bring it up yet. I have no doubts my friends will be thrilled to have me here, but as I’m not certain with my decision, I didn’t want to tell them yet.

“I spotted you searching how to do it on your laptop earlier. Plus, you kept asking Nikolai what the business course is like here. Combined with what you’ve just told me; I wouldn’t blame you for wanting a bit of a fresh start. However, I might question it a little if your reasoning goes deeper than just a ‘fresh start’.”

I run a hand through my hair. “It’s not just about him.” I glance away. “There’s nothing left for me there.”

It’s the truth that I haven’t stopped thinking about for a week. Everything about New York, the university, my apartment, the restaurants, all of it, remind me of her. I know it will pass eventually. It will have to, as one day I’ll practically own it and will have no choice but to live there. But for now, it’s just filled with ghosts.

Plus, moving to where its easiest to get my revenge is a massive bonus.

Jeremy is quiet for a moment before nodding slowly. “Then transfer. If that’s what you really want.”

I study him. “You don’t think it’s a mistake?”

Jeremy shrugs. “It doesn’t matter what I think. If you’re serious about it, I’ll back you. We all will, you know that.”

I let out a breath I hadn’t even realized I was holding. “I won’t let Yulian win.”

Jeremy gives me a small smirk. “I know Vaughn. Of that, I have no doubt.”

He turns to leave but pauses. He turns back to face me for a moment. “You know… I heard Yulian is throwing a party for the Serpents and friends in a couple days. Just thought you should know.”

He gives me a sly grin. Well, look at that, I guess my ‘mature’ friend does know how to cause some chaos once in a while.

Well, after so many years of trying to get my attention, I suppose it’s time Yulian finally gets some.

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Yulian

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The part thrives around me, lights flashing in chaotic rhythms, bass rattling through the air, bodies pressing together in drunken revelry. I move through the crowd like a phantom, my mask firmly in place and my presence commanding attention without effort. I've spent the last hour nursing a drunk, conversing with guests and allowing myself to indulge in being the centre of it all.

Then, something shifts.

It's subtle at first, a slight disorientation, a haziness at the edges of my vision. But within moments, the feeling thickens, wrapping around my mind like suffocating smoke. My limbs grow heavy, my grip on my glass loosens. The music warps, stretching and distorting in my ears.

Something is wrong.

I try blinking hard, trying to clear the fog invading my thoughts, but the effort only makes my stomach churn. With my head swaying slightly, I attempt to step forward. The floor tilts beneath me. The people around me become shapeless figures, blurred and indistinct. I don't even consider for a moment asking one of these strangers for help and I don't trust myself to handle my phone right now.

I stumble toward the stairs, my fingers curling, grasping, at the banister as I begin my way up the grand staircase.

My room. I just need to get to my room.

One step. Then another. My breath comes in shallow pants as my vision swims. My body burns, heat crawling under my skin like something alive. I swallow hard. The world is too bright, too loud, too

much.

The moment I reach the top of the stairs, I nearly collapse. However, a firm grip catches me before I can fall, strong fingers wrap around my bicep. I barely register the voice that follows.

“Yulian.” A familiar tone. Low, steady. The voice of someone I know. “You’ve been drugged.”

Yeah, no fucking shit, dipshit.

I force my heavy-lidded eyes to focus, blinging until the figure in front of me sharpens into clarity. Kayden. My law professor. Or, officially, anyway. His more unofficially title is my pseudo babysitter. My father has him looking out for me as a favour. Thankfully, the older man isn’t particularly, if at all, overbearing. Plus, his cold and detached nature makes him incredibly fun to irritate at times.

My lips part to speak, but only a breathy, slurred exhale comes out.

“Come on,” Kayden demands, adjusting his grip. He pulls me against his side, wrapping an arm over my shoulder. To an outsider, it would look friendly. He guides me down the hall, toward my bedroom. “Let’s get you somewhere safe.”

The short walk to my room feels like a marathon. I barely notice when Kayden pushes open the door, barely registering the sensation of being lowered onto my bed. My body sinks into the mattress, limbs loose and uncooperative.

Kayden stands over me, expressionless. Then, his sharp gaze flickers

toward the mask still clinging to my face. Without a word, he reaches down and unfastens it, sliding it off with ease.

My lips part in protest, but no words come out.

Kayden observes the mask for a moment, before pressing it against his own face, securing it into place. “Rest,” he orders, his voice a firm command. “I’ll handle this.”

With that, he turns and disappears through the door, leaving me lying on my bed, drowning in the unfamiliar sensation of helplessness.

God, I hope he lets the bastard live. I’d much like to torture and murder whatever prick did this myself.

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Vaughn

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With practised ease, I slide the window open and slip through, landing in a silent crouch on the thick carpet of Yulian’s bedroom. I straighten slowly, the small backpack I brought snug against my back and knife in hand. My breath is steady, my pulse a slow and measured thrum of anticipation. I’m prepared for the first step of my revenge.

I turn my head, scanning the room, then-

The sight before me freezes me instantly.

Yulian lays sprawled out on the bed, limbs loose, shirt halfway unbuttoned as if he had made a feeble attempt to remove it before giving up. Taking a step closer, still totally silent, I notice his pupils are dilated and his gaze is hazy. However, clearly, he isn't *that* out of it, as his eyes are still sharp enough to land straight on me.

A slow, lazy grin curves his lips.

"Vaughn." His voice is thick, sluggish and unmistakeably delighted. "I was wondering when we would see each other again." He attempts to turn toward me more, but only succeeds in flopping his head in my direction.

His tone, almost expectant, makes me grit my teeth. I step forward and press the cold edge of my knife against Yulian's throat, just enough to see a tiny droplet of blood slide down his pale throat.

"What the fuck did you take?" I growl.

Dumb motherfucker. If I loose not one but both of the people I swore vengeance against to means other than my own hand, I'll be fucking pissed.

Yulian chuckles, entirely unbothered by my knife at his throat. If anything, I think I saw his eyes light up a little when he first felt the sharpness against him. "Didn't take anything. Suppose someone thought it would be funny to slip something into my drink. Guess your confusion means it wasn't you, was it?" His lips quirk upward. "If you wanted me pliant and underneath you, all you had to do was ask, Mishka. No drugs needed."

My grip on the knife tightens, and I choose to ignore the last part. “I don’t need a drug to take you down. I can do that well enough on my own.”

A part of me wants to press him as to who he may think actually drugged him. I don’t know why. I don’t care. So, what if he has other enemies, I already knew that.

For some reason, though, the idea of someone other than me hurting him makes a fury I didn’t know I was capable of rise in my chest. I choose to push that feeling deep down.

I shrug my backpack off and unzip it. From inside, I pull out my chains.

“Oo, getting kinky are we,” Yulian grins devilishly.

His words are becoming more clear, proving to me that I need to speed this part up.

Ignoring Yulian’s taunts and the heat curling in my stomach, I grab Yulian’s wrists and yank them to each bedpost, spreading him out in a starfish position. Taking two of my chains, I securely tie each wrist to each corner. Yulian doesn’t even attempt to resist.

“You could’ve just asked,” he murmurs. He pulls experimentally on the chains, which, of course, do not budge.

“Shut up.” I step back, surveying my work. The fact that he is clearly enjoying this infuriates me to no end. I wonder if he will still be having fun once I’m done with him.

I observe him for a moment. His eyes are still full, but it appears more so to accommodate for the darkness around us, rather than the glazed look formerly in them. He doesn't wear any shoes, just socks, and I notice them thrown across the room. The few buttons he does have opened allow a limited view to his chest. I see part of a tattoo on there, something long that goes across it. A snake, perhaps? It would make sense, seen as he is a serpent.

His nipples are hard, likely due to the cold air. Or perhaps it's from the way he is looking at me right now. The grin on his lips turns into a smirk and I realise I've been staring at his chest for way too long.

Ignoring him, I reach my hand out, allowing my fingers to trail gently over his chest, over his heart and up toward his collarbone. My hand rests gently over his neck.

Without warning, I quickly tighten my hand with so much strength that Yulian gasps instantly, though no air goes in. His limbs twitch on instinct at first, but he otherwise doesn't try and stop me.

"Camilla," I say coldly, observing as his skin begins to turn red.

A chuckle chokes its way out of him and his eyes brighten with amusement. With my other hand, I press the knife against his heart.

"You ruined her. She's dead now, because of what you did."

His eyes darken again at that, while the grin slips right off his face. Without warning, his head snaps forward, smashing into my own. I hadn't even realised how close our faces had gotten.

I jerk backward, letting go of his neck. I hear him take a few gasping breaths. He blinks rapidly, likely still recovering from the drug. Once he has come to his senses, he glares at me.

“Why do you even care so much? She *cheated* on you. Be thankful she is gone,” he spits at me.

I scoff, shaking my head. He doesn’t understand. “You ruined her,” I hiss.

Yulian’s lashes flutter, while his smirk returns. “I ruined her? You act like its my fault she willingly climbed into my bed and moaned my name.”

My anger flares white-hot, and before I can stop myself, I climb over him, straddling his waist. I hold my knife to his chest.

“Fuck, Mishka, I think I could get used to the sight of you sat on top of me like that. If only we were wearing a little less clothes.”

Ignoring him, I press my knife into his chest. A sharp inhale is Yulian’s only response as the blade bit into his skin. I watch myself, transfixed, as I carve a deep, deliberate ‘V’ into his chest, blood welling instantly across the fresh wound. Its not deep enough to cause real damage, but enough I hope it will scar.

Yulian’s breath hitches, but it isn’t a sound of pain. His head tips back, exposing his throat, his lips parted on a slow exhale.

Mine, I think suddenly.

I don't understand where the thought has come from. But all of sudden, the idea of my mark on him, claiming him, fills me with so much satisfaction I feel like I could burst.

As I finish my work, my hands become unsteady, but not with anger. It's something else. Something I don't want to think about.

Yulian licks his lips, watching me through half-lidded eyes. "You could've just asked if you wanted to leave a mark on me, Mishka.

My stomach twists and suddenly, the room feels too small, too hot. I drop the knife from my hands and scramble off of him, standing beside him instead. My head shakes as if it can rid me of the strange, unwelcome thoughts filling it.

I attempt to open my mouth, but nothing comes out. Eventually, I just grab my knife, storm to the window and leave.

It takes me another twenty minutes to even realise I left him there, still chained to the bed with *my* chains. Fuck. Why am I so out of sorts about this?

This was supposed to be revenge.

So why does it feel like something entirely different.

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Yulian

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I rub my wrists, easing away the soreness that had been left by the chains. Mikhail just helped me out of them and only gave me a weird look when I insisted he not damage them in any way. Not easily fazed, that one. Though, I don't think he believed me when I insisted, I just got a little too freaky with a girl.

Anyway, my movements are still slightly sluggish, but the drugs have mostly worn off now. I'd better make sure Kayden has whatever fucker did it ready to die.

As I walk toward the bathroom, I feel a sharp sting on my chest, bringing me fully into awareness. I flick on the light, squinting at my own reflection in the mirror. My shirt is already half undone and with one final tug, I let it fall open completely.

And there it is.

A fresh, crimson 'V' carved right into my skin.

I run my fingers over the wound, exhaling sharply at the sensation. The pain, the heat of it, the reality of it, it's intoxicating. Vaughn has done this. Vaughn has marked me.

My lips curl into a wide grin, eyes lighting up with something feral.

He's practically as obsessed with me as I am with him. Why else would he claim me in such a way?

The idea of this mark fading, of my skin healing over it, washing it away, was unacceptable. I need it to stay. Permanently.

I consider my options. I should probably just wait it out for now. It might scar as it is anyway. But if it doesn't, I could always go over it again with a knife until it turns permanent. But, then again, it wouldn't really be the same if it was my own hand causing the scar. No, I'll have to have Mishka do it again. That's fine, I'm sure he will be happy to, judging by the mesmerized look he had on his face earlier while he was doing it.

I suppose I could also have it tattooed on me. Though, that isn't quite as violent as I like. I just need something permanent, something that would ensure that no matter what happened, Vaughn's claim on me will never fade. Oh well, I'll figure it out later.

I laugh suddenly, a bright, delighted sound. Examining my reflection, I notice my pupils blown wide, excitement making my breath quicken. What would suit him? Something poetic, meaningful… A 'Y' for Yulian? No, too simple. Maybe something in Russian. I'll do more research.

There is also the issue of convincing him to let me do it. Evidently, he isn't over the whole I fucked his ex-thing. I can't believe he was so upset by the idea of me 'ruining' her. Can't he see that I did him a favour? Guess I'll have to make sure he never finds out I killed her too.

But, considering what happened tonight, he clearly is as obsessed as I am. So, I'm sure I won't have to wait too long.

I smirk at myself in the mirror, eyes wild with amusement.

How I do love playing this game.

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Vaughn

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My fingers grip my phone tightly in my hand as my knuckles turn white. I sit on the edge of my bed with my head bowed. I swore to myself I wouldn't do this. Once was enough, yet here I am, putting myself through the torment of watching it, hearing it. My thumb hovers above the play button, daring me.

I haven't been able to get the video out of my head, especially since that night at the Serpents mansion. It's been only two days, yet I haven't been able to get it out of my mind. What he looked like with my initial carved on his chest. The smirk on his face while he fucked my girlfriend.

I exhale sharply; jaw clenched. I press play.

The screen flickers on, and there they are. Once again. Camilla and Vaughn.

The air in the room feels stifling, closing in around me as the video plays out in all its devastating detail. I had watched this the first time with nothing but pure, unfiltered rage. Had memorised every second, every movement, every sound, letting them burn into my mind like a brand. It had fuelled me, had driven me to hate Yulian with a fire so intense it threatened to consume me.

But this time, something is different.

My gaze no longer fixes on Camilla, on her betrayal, her deceit, the way she reaches for Yulian as though I had never meant anything. No, this time my eyes sought Yulian. The way he moves. The way he smirks like he knows exactly what he's doing, like he is performing just for me, like this was never about Camilla at all.

And then, it is as if a switch flips inside of me.

My stomach tightens, my breath hitching in a way that has nothing to do with anger. Heat coils low in my cut, unwelcome and unbidden. This is wrong. So, so wrong.

My cock twitches in my underwear, rapidly hardening. I don't even look at Camilla. All my focus is on him. His face, his body. Quickly, as if doing it with enough speed will make it not be happening, I turn the volume down, so I don't have to hear her voice. So, I can focus entirely on him.

Slowly, my hand trails down my chest and dips below my sweatpants, then below my boxers. I wrap my hand around myself, my breath heavy and neck hot. I go slow at first, before speeding up, along with my breathing.

Then, Yulian turns his head and looks straight at the camera. Straight at me. I freeze, as if it isn't just a video of him but him in the flesh, knowing exactly what I'm doing right now. I try to blink it away, but the damage is done. The image was there. Yulian's lips curled into a knowing smirk, his voice taunting.

What is wrong with me?

I swallow thickly, my hand retreating from between my legs. I feel like my body betrayed me, responding to something it had no right to. But its not like I tried to stop it at all, did I?

With a growl, I throw my phone across the room. It clatters against the wall and drops on to the carpet with a dull thud. I bury my face in my hands, fingers threading through my hair, tugging sharply as if the pain could somehow ground me.

What is happening to me?

I carved a V into Yulian's chest just days ago, had branded him with my rage, my hate. And yet, now, all I could think about was how that mark looked on him, how it made Yulian mine. How I had liked seeing it there, watching as it bled.

I just got hard, almost got myself off, because of a video of another guy having sex with my girlfriend. And my eyes weren't even slightly on her.

A shudder runs down my spine. I need to get out of my room, get out of my own head.

But even as I stand, hands trembling with suppressed fury, I know the truth.

No matter how far I run, Yulian is already under my skin.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed chap 4. thanks for reading!

Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

surprise! you get two in one day.

so basically the reason chap 4 was a couple days late is cause i literally thought i posed it when i hadnt. while finishing up this chapter today, i went to see if there were any comments on the last and was like oh shit where is it. so i posted it, finished this chap and now you get two in one day. my bad

enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Eight Years Ago

Vaughn

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The cold bites into my skin, seeping through the thin fabric of my clothes like icy fingers. I curl tighter into myself, hunger gnawing at my insides as I stare at the dim light flickering from the single bulb above me. My wrists ache from the ropes binding them, the rough fibres biting into my skin. I exhale slowly, my breath almost visible in the damp air.

Thankfully, I was given a thin Pyjama set to wear. I think it's Yulians. However, it barely helps to keep the cold away. As far as Anatoly is aware, I'm only being fed once a day. Little does he know about Yulian's late-night visits. Even then, however, I'm still in a constant state of hunger.

Yulian has been every night for the last week. We talk about anything and everything. I'm beginning to like his company, not that I'll ever tell him that. He's just left from his visit tonight, telling me that tomorrow I can have a jam sandwich, which he hasn't given me yet. However,

unfortunately for him, I don't plan on being here for it.

I need to get out of here.

I've been devising a plan, spending each day scanning the basement for something that can help me escape, and I think I've found it. My gaze lands on the wall opposite me, where weapons hang in neat rows, knives, swords, even a rusted axe. If I could just knock one loose, I might be able to use it to free myself.

Twisting slightly, I lift my knee and kick out toward the nearest pile of boxes. My foot barely grazes the edge of the wooden box, yet it's enough. It comes tumbling down with a loud crash. I wince, my entire body freezing at the sound. My heart pounds as I wait, ears straining for footsteps above.

Nothing. No one comes.

I exhale slowly, shifting my attention to the spilled contents of the box. It was filled with trinkets, a tattered doll, ribbons, a silver hairbrush and a bunch of other hair products. The belongings of a young girl. I frown, wondering what it could be doing here, then I remember Yulian's little sister. This stuff must have been hers. I hope she doesn't mind.

Grabbing the hairbrush, I stand shakily. I've spent a lot of time sat down the last week, not to mention the aching muscles inside of me. I turn around, so my back is to the wall of weapons. I crane my neck around to look at the wall, lining myself up. Then, with as much precision as possible, I chuck the hairbrush.

It doesn't have much force, but it doesn't need it. The weapons aren't strapped to the wall very well, likely to make grabbing them quickly easier. With aim that I hope would make my mother proud (she is the best sniper I know, of course), the hairbrush hits the knife, causing it to clatter to the

floor.

Just out of reach.

Gritting my teeth, I stretch my leg out, my foot nudging the handle. The knife wobbles, sliding an inch closer. I do it again, this time with more force, and the blade scrapes across the floor toward me. It wasn't ideal, picking it up with bound hands would be tricky, but it was better than nothing.

Twisting my fingers, I manage to grip the handle awkwardly. Inhaling deeply, I begin sawing at the ropes behind my back. The dull edge makes it difficult, but I work relentlessly, my muscles burning with effort. After what feels like an eternity, the ropes give way, snapping apart. I flex my fingers, relief washing over me as I rub at the raw skin on my wrists.

One down. One to go.

I work at the ties securing me to the wall, yanking the last knot free before pushing myself toward the stairs, but I ignored it. There is no time to waste.

Moving quickly yet carefully, trying to emulate the impressive silence with which both Anatoly and his son move with, I creep to the basement stairs, climbing them quickly. I test the doorknob. Locked.

Of course.

My mind races, searching for an alternative. Then, my mind flickers back to the toppled box. I go back down the stairs and over to wear the items lay across the floor. I crouch, rummaging through the mess until my fingers closed around a small, delicate hairclip.

My uncle showed me a trick with this once. It is worth a shot.

I kneel by the door, slipping the hairclip into the keyhole. I try to remember when I watched my uncle do this, how hard could it be? I jiggle it, twisting and turning, my patience wearing thin. With the ropes cut, I won't be able to go back if someone comes to check on me. I need to get out. Now.

Just as frustration threatens to overtake me, the lock clicks.

My chest tightens with exhilaration as I slowly push the door open, peering into the dimly lit hallway. The house is eerily quiet.

I step forward, my movements swift but careful. I just had to get outside.

One step. Two. Three.

Then, a voice from behind him.

"Where are you going?"

My entire body stiffens. I turn around slowly, already knowing who he'd see. By this point, I'd recognise his voice in my sleep.

Yulian stands at the other end of the hallway, a confused look on his face. His eyebrows furrow and his head tilts.

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Present Day

Vaughn

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This is not obsession. It's strategy.

I need to know what he's doing. I need to know where he is, who he's with, what he's thinking. He's a threat, always has been, always will be. And threats must be monitored.

At least, that's what I tell myself as I trail behind him, watching from the shadows as he moves through the university campus like he owns it. From afar, it almost seems like he does. People glance at him and quickly look away, giving him a wide berth. He moves with that lazy, confident stride of his, every movement deliberate, almost theatrical. He's a performer even when he's not trying to be.

I should hate him for that alone.

But my eyes won't stop following him.

It's infuriating how easily he draws attention, like he was born for it. Every part of him demands to be watched. His presence fills every room, his arrogance undeniable, the smirk always playing at his lips as if he knows something the rest of us don't. He probably does.

I shouldn't care.

I should look away, should stop watching, should stop following.

But I don't.

It starts small. Catching glimpses of him in his lecture halls, in the courtyard, at the gym. I tell myself I'm just making sure he's not planning anything. That it's all just precaution. But then I start going out of my way to see him. Taking the longer route around the campus because I know it'll put me in his path. Finding reasons to linger in places where he spends time.

I watch him when he doesn't know he's being watched. When his smirk fades and his expression shift into something unreadable. I watch the way his fingers drum against the table when he's bored, the way his head tilts when he's studying someone, dissecting them with those sharp, knowing eyes.

And I hate it.

I hate that I notice these things. That I remember them. That I catalogue every little detail as if they matter. I hate that I can't stop.

I tell myself I'm looking for weakness.

But it feels like I'm just looking for him.

But, like I said, it's all part of my strategy for revenge. That's all. The initiation is soon, and I just need to kill some time before it. Besides, I might very well be living here soon, so following Yulian around has just given me a way to learn my way around. Killing two birds with one stone. It's all for convenience, really.

I snap out of my thoughts as I hear him, loudly. I can't tear my eyes away when he throws his head back and laughs.

The sound carries, warm and rich in a way that catches me off guard. Yulian stands just outside one of the university buildings, leaning against a pillar, talking with a girl, Annie. I know her name because I make it my business to know who Yulian surrounds himself with. She's smart, confident, seemingly unaffected by the chaos he brings wherever he goes. And right now, she's laughing along with him, grinning as if they share some inside joke.

I clench my jaw.

I shouldn't care. I don't care. Yulian can laugh with whoever the hell he wants. But something about the way he's looking at her, that lazy smirk, that easy posture-

I know that look. I've seen it before.

For some reason, the idea of him giving it to her makes my skin crawl. It's ridiculous. I know it is. But my hands ball into fists at my sides anyway, nails digging into my palms.

She says something, nudging his arm, and Yulian leans in closer. It's nothing. So, what if he is sleeping with her? I don't care. But my stomach twists, and I have to force myself to stay still. To keep watching instead of storming over there and-

And what?

I grit my teeth.

She's not the enemy here. Yulian is. Yulian is the one who's spent years making my life hell. The one who tricked and betrayed me. The one I swore to ruin. The one I despise with every fibre of my being. And yet, standing there, smiling so easily at someone else, he makes something ugly coil in my chest.

I hate him.

I hate him.

Then why can't I look away?

-

Yulian's laugh echoes in my head, playing on a loop like a broken record I can't switch off. I'm not sure which irritates me more, the sound itself or the way it had been aimed at Annie.

I shouldn't care. I don't.

It doesn't matter who Yulian spends his time with, who he smiles at, who he fucking touches.

I scowl, my fingers tapping out an erratic rhythm against the desk as I lean back in my chair. I followed Yulian though campus until he headed home, and I did as well. I was tempted to go all the way to the Serpents mansion, but I decided against it. I couldn't risk anyone

catching me.

The bastard smiled the whole time, grinning at people like he didn't have a care in the world. Like he hasn't spent years tormenting me. Like he isn't the reason my blood boils on a daily basis.

The worst part is that its not just aner. It's not just the fury curling hot and vicious in my stomach. It's something else. Something uglier. Something that makes me clench my jaw when I see Yulian's hand brush Annie's arm. Or anyone's for that matter.

I grip the edge of the desk enough that my knuckles ache. Yulian should not be able to make me feel this way. I've spent too long allowing his existence to control my thoughts and actions. I've had enough.

I should be focusing on revenge, on making Yulian pay for what he has done, for what he has taken from me. And I will.

My hand twitches toward my phone.

The initiation.

Yulian had to know about it by now. He must be curious, to want in. And I can use that. Could twist that curiosity into something painful, something humiliating.

My mouth curves into a slow, humourless smile. Yes, that's exactly what I'll do.

I open my messages, my fingers moving before I can second guess

myself.

Come to the initiation. If you think you can handle it.

Then I add the QR code.

Its short, to the point. A challenge wrapped up in bait, dangled in front of Yulian like a lure he won't be able to resist.

-

Yulian

-

I lounge on the velvet couch in the Serpents living room, idly swirling a glass of whiskey between my fingers. Across from me, Annie sits with one leg crossed over the other, scrolling through her phone, looking the perfect mix of classy and business-like. Mikhail paces near the fireplace, arms crossed tight over his chest.

"You're looking broody, Mikhail," I smirk, taking a sip. "It's a bad look for you. Makes you look…what's the word?" I turn to Annie. "Miserable? Constipated?"

"Like a man who has to keep you from getting yourself killed," Mikhail grumbles.

Annie snorts but doesn't look up from her phone. "A full-time job."

I raise my glass in agreement. “And yet, he persists.”

We don’t mention that its literally his job to keep me alive as my head guard and right-hand man. But he is also my best friend.

Mikhail ignores me, turning his sharp gaze on Annie. “You could at least try talking some sense into him.”

“Why?” She finally glances up, arching a perfectly shaped brow. “He doesn’t listen to you. Why would he listen to me?”

“Exactly,” I say. “You know me so well.” I give her a wink and she rolls her eyes.

Mikhail lets out a sharp breath, about to retort, but my phone buzzes on the table, interrupting him. I reach for it lazily, but the moment I see the name on the screen, my entire body stills.

Vaughn.

I tap the message open, reading over the short words carefully, savouring them. This is the first message he has ever sent me.

An invitation to the initiation.

Well, well, well. Now, isn’t this interesting? And unexpected.

I keep my expression carefully neutral, but the rush of excitement

thrums beneath my skin. I can't have Mikhail and Annie knowing how giddy I get at the thought of tormenting him. Or him tormenting me. I'm not fussy. While I'm sure they know there is something going on between us, I can't let too much slip.

Vaughn is inviting me into his world. Luring me in. Whether it is a trap, a test, or something else entirely, it doesn't matter. Sure, he might try and kill me there. But if that's what he wants, I'll happily indulge to make him happy. Obviously, I won't let him actually kill me, then he would be free to be with someone else, and that's just not happening.

"What is it?" Mikhail asks, seemingly already suspicious. God, he really needs a little more fun in his life.

I take my time setting my phone down, stretching out my legs before answering. "Vaughn."

Mikhail's expression darkens immediately. "What does he want?"

"He's inviting me to the initiation."

Mikhail curses under his breath, running a hand down his face. "No, absolutely not."

I hum, though there is frustration in it. I may consider him a friend, but he better not forget who the fuck I am. "I don't recall asking for permission. Not that you would ever be able to give me it."

"This is a terrible idea, Yulian."

“Maybe.” I grin wolfishly. “But aren’t those the most fun?”

Mikhail appears irritated, which only makes my smile widen. But before I can keep goading him, Annie finally speaks up.

“You’re going?” Her voice is measured, but there is something else there. Interest. Curiosity.

I turn to her, watching her carefully. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

A slow, knowing smile curls at the corner of her lips, but she doesn’t try to push me one way or the other like Mikhail did. Instead, she leans forward slightly, resting her elbows on her knees. “Then you’ll need someone watching the security feeds.”

Mikhail shoots her a glare. “You’re encouraging this?”

“Last time I checked, he was the boss. What he says goes.” Hm. She is most certainly growing on me. “Besides, I’m being practical. If he is going to go, he should have backup. I am sure the Heathens have cameras everywhere. I’m good with tech stuff. I can keep an eye on things remotely.”

I tilt my head, considering her. Annie rarely offers anything unless she sees an advantage in it. And yet, her tone wasn’t eager, it was calculated. She wants to be involved, but she isn’t desperate for my approval. She is simply showing what she can offer me. She’s playing the long game, and I can respect that.

Finally, I nod. “Fine. I’ll keep a line open to you.”

She gives a small nod, satisfied, but not showing herself as overly pleased. Just happy to assist the boss where she can. “I’ll have a look beforehand and let you know anything important, then set the rest up.”

I nod at her, pleased.

Mikhail lets out another heavy sigh. “This is a mistake.”

I stand, clapping him on the shoulder. “Then let’s make it a memorable one.”

-

I’m sat at my desk, in my office when I next hear my phone buzz. Only, this time, it doesn’t stop after one buzz, and I realise someone is calling me. For a split second, my heart jumps to my throat and I feel excitement well inside of me.

I grab my phone, ready to-

Oh.

It’s Kayden. Well, that’s just ruined my mood.

Sighing, I press accept.

“Professor,” I greet.

“I’m not your professor if you don’t attend class.”

Ouch. It’s not like a never attend class. Just rarely. It’s not my fault that the content is super easy and walking around campus, having people admire me, is way more fun.

I chuckle. “I suppose that’s true. To what do I owe the call?”

“You owe me your life after that night, but I digress.”

“I repay my saviours pretty well but you kind of left me on a cliffhanger by not giving me the identity of the motherfucker who roofied my drink. Is this a call to rectify that over-sight?”

That really pissed me off. How dare he not let me kill whoever tried to hurt me? I wasn’t so angry about it as the other stuff that happened that night with Vaughn kind of overshadowed it, but still. I had been looking forward to some violence.

“I clearly said that won’t be happening.”

I must admit, I am curious who my cold, grumpy professor is so protective over.

“Just checking,” I whistle as I look through the papers printed out in front of me. Annie got me the layout of the Heathens mansion and the grounds the initiation takes place on. “If that’s all, I have an important

event to dress for."

"Event?" I can tell he's playing dumb, when he is actually fishing for details. However, I decide to indulge him.

"I'm paying out neighbours a little visit," a smile spreads across my face at the idea of what could happen tonight. "In disguise, naturally."

While I of course want Vaughn to know who I am, I can't risk his annoying friends getting in the way.

"Is this by any chance the Heathens' initiation?" Kayden asks.

"Uh-huh. I want to see what the fuss is all about and confirm something about that night."

"I told you it's not one of them."

Interesting. He seems quite certain of this, almost too certain.

"I know, but someone was in my room after you left, and something tells me it's one of our Heathen friends. I'm getting all excited thinking about it."

Of course, I know exactly who was in my room. But I can't tell Kayden about that. So, I have to play it cool and mysterious.

"Were you sent an invitation?"

“How did you know?” I question. Most people would assume I was sneaking in somehow to cause havoc. It makes no sense for me to be sent an invitation.

“A hunch.” Mysterious motherfucker.

“Yulian,” Kayden asks in an annoying tone, and I just know he’s about to ask me for something. Well, I suppose I do owe him one.

“Hmm?”

“Forward me the invitation text.”

That is not what I was expecting him to say. But it certainly is interesting.

“Why?”

“Scientific interest.” That’s bullshit.

However, a laugh escapes me. Who knew my cold, grumpy professor could enjoy a little chaos once in a while? “I don’t know what the fuck you even gain from this, but I like your way of doing things.”

“Everyone does.”

I laugh again. This guy is actually pretty funny, maybe I should pay attention to him more. “Will send shortly. Laters.”

I end the call, wanting to start getting ready for the initiation. Before I do, however, I quickly send the QR code to Kayden. Maybe I’ll even see him there.

-

Vaughn

-

The Heathens’ living room is in a state of controlled chaos.

I stand in front of a full-length mirror, looping the chain around my hands methodically, testing the weight. It’s a familiar feeling, grounding in a way. Behind me, the others are sprawled across the room, each going through their own pre-initiation rituals, or, in Nikolai’s case, making as much mess as possible.

“I don’t get why you insist on that thing,” Gareth tells me, leaning against the wall, his bow slung over his shoulder. “Feels a bit theatrical.”

“Says the guy who brought a bow and arrow to a fistfight,” I deadpan back.

“It’s effective,” Gareth shoots back, adjusting the quiver on his back.

With rubber tips, I’m not sure exactly how ‘effective’ it can really be,

but sure.

“It’s pretentious,” Killian corrects, kicking his feet up on the armrest of the couch, tossing a baseball bat between his hands. “What are you going to do, Katniss? Stand dramatically at the top of a tree?

“I could hit you from here,” Gareth replies smoothly, not looking up as he checks his arrows.

“Do it, I dare you,” Killian grins.

Jeremy sighs dramatically. “Can we not injure each other before the initiation even starts?”

Nikolai scoffs, cracking his knuckles. “Speak for yourself, Jer, I need to stretch.”

“Stretch? You’re about to pummel people with your bare hands, what do you need to stretch for?” Jeremy asks.

“Gotta make sure I don’t pull something while breaking someone’s nose. Flexibility is key. Besides, who says fighting is the only thing that will give me a workout tonight?” He grins suggestively and we all roll our eyes. I expect pretty much everyone out there tonight will be happy to sleep with him, though the glint in his eye suggests that perhaps he’s not just looking for ‘anyone’.

“You’re not doing ballet, Niko,” I mutter, finally satisfied with how my chain coils around my wrist.

“Could if I wanted to. Imagine me in a little tutu.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Too bad, cause now you are.”

Gareth exhales sharply through his nose, shaking his head as he turns them out, while Killian just cackles, clearly enjoying himself far too much.

Jeremy pinches the bridge of his nose. “God help us all.”

“He abandoned us long ago,” Killian muses. “You think he saw us coming and just noped out? Like, ‘yeah, not dealing with that lot, too much work.”

“Understandable, honestly,” I pitch in, though I’m aware my tone is distracted. I’m not paying attention as much as I usually would. My mind is elsewhere. On a certain someone. On the fact that I was walking straight into a night where I’d finally get my hands on him again.

But I can’t think about that now. Not yet.

"Okay, roll call," Jeremy says, ignoring the antics. "Gareth, bow and arrow- impractical but fine. Killian, baseball bat- questionable, but expected. Vaughn, chains- predictable. Niko, just your fists, as usual."

"Weapons slow me down," Nikolai says, flexing his fingers. "Besides, I

like to feel the impact."

"You're a freak," Gareth mutters.

"You say that like it’s a bad thing."

"It is."

"Debatable."

"Alright, before we get into another round of ‘who’s the biggest menace,’ does everyone at least have their emergency buttons on them?" Jeremy asks pointedly.

There is a chorus of groans but, begrudgingly, each of us shows the small device clipped somewhere on their person.

"Happy now, Mom?" Nikolai teases.

"I will be when we all come out tonight unscathed. If I have to bury any of you tonight, I’ll personally bring you back to kill you again myself."

"Aw, he cares about us."

"You’re insufferable."

"And you love it."

Jeremy ignores him, turning to me, probably as I have been unusually quiet throughout the exchange. "You good?"

I nod once. "I’m fine."

Jeremy doesn’t look convinced, but he lets it go. For now.

"Alright then," he says, standing. "Let’s go cause some mayhem."

"Finally!" Nikolai groans, cracking his neck. "I was getting bored."

"Can’t have that," Killian says, smirking as he swings his bat onto his shoulder. "Would be a shame if you got restless."

I exhale slowly, flexing my fingers around the chain in my grip.

I’m ready.

Chapter End Notes

i know its a little shorter, but the next one is the initiation! so get ready, its gunna be a big one.

thanks for reading. :)

Chapter Six

Chapter Notes

> its a big one! for both flashbacks and current timeline. enjoy seeing what vaughn and yulian got up to on the night of the initiation ;).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Yulian

-

I wasn't meant to be out of bed. I was just wandering, like I always do. Restless feet on cold stone, the way I like it, quiet and secret. I turn the corner into the hallway above the basement, and then-

I freeze.

There he is.

Vaughn.

He's halfway down the corridor, his back to me. I can see that his hands are still red from the ropes. His shirt is wrinkled, stained, too big for him.

He looks like he doesn't belong here.

But he does. He belongs to me.

“What are you doing?” I ask, stepping toward him.

He jolts, spinning to face me, clutching something behind his back. A knife? No. The silver glint told me it’s the hairclip from my sister’s old things. Smart.

“I was-uh-just looking for the bathroom,” he says.

I tilt my head. “The bathroom’s downstairs. Same place you’ve been pissing for a week.”

His jaw tightens. He doesn’t reply.

I step closer. His eyes flick to the door behind me. I can see the calculation in them. The panic.

“You’re trying to leave,” I say, the words tumbling out before I even know I’d decided to say them.

He doesn’t deny it.

Of course he is trying to leave. Who wouldn’t?

But something in me twists.

He’d lied to me.

After I'd brought him food. After I'd sat and talked with him for hours. After I'd memorised the shape of his mouth when he laughed, and the way he squinted when he was pretending not to like something.

He is mine.

Not because I own him like my father owns people. Not like that.

But because I cared. I saw him. And he was the only person who ever looked at me like I was something more than just Yulian Dmitriev, the boy who'd someday be worse than his father.

"No," I say. "You can't leave."

He furrows his brows. "You're not serious."

"I am." I step in front him.

He laughs, sharp and disbelieving. "I'm not staying here. I have to go home."

Home.

The word feels like a knife.

Home means away from me.

“You can’t,” I say, quieter now. “I don’t want you to go.”

“Yulian, move.”

“I looked after you. I brought you food. I made you laugh,” I said, my voice cracking. “You’re mine. You have to stay with me.”

He shakes his head. “This isn’t normal.”

“I don’t care what’s normal,” I snap. “I just-just stay. Please.”

He looks at me then, really looks at me, and I hate the pity I see in his eyes.

“You don’t get to keep me like some pet,” he says. “I shouldn’t be here.”

I tilt my head. “But you are here.”

“And I’m leaving.”

He tries to move past me.

I step in front of the door. Not fast. Just enough.

I don't know how to say what I'm thinking, so I don't try. I don't tell him I liked the way he spoke. I don't tell him how I wait to see him every day, or how I started daydreaming in my lessons about sitting across from him on the floor and hearing whatever ideas he has about the world.

I don't say that he makes everything feel less heavy.

I don't care how I'm going to keep him.

I just want him to want to stay.

But he doesn't.

I just say, again, "You can't leave."

Vaughn blinks. "Yulian, please. Let me go."

I don't answer.

He looks so… determined. And annoyed. And tired. Like he is trying not to be scared, but he is. I know fear when I see it. I've been raised in a house made of it.

"We have to be together. You cannot go."

"You don't get to decide that," he snaps.

I stay silent. Letting the weight of it hang between us.

Because the truth is: I do get to decide. Not just because of who my father is. But because I won't let him go. Not yet. Probably not ever. Not when I've only just gotten used to the sound of his voice echoing off the basement walls. Not when I still haven't figured out what makes him tick.

He tries again to move past me.

He steps forward to push past me, and I panic. My throat tightens. My limbs lock.

So, I do the one thing I know will stop him.

I open my mouth and scream-

"Papa!"

Vaughn freezes.

Footsteps thunder above us.

Vaughn turns on me, eyes flashing. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he hisses.

I don't answer.

Because I don't regret it.

He doesn't understand. He isn't supposed to. He thinks I want to hurt him. I don't. I just want him to stay.

Simple.

He belongs here.

He belongs with me.

And one day, maybe, he'll understand why.

And even though my chest aches and guilt presses heavy on my shoulders, I don't regret it.

Because I know now, without question-

I can't live without Vaughn.

And if he won't stay because he wants to… I'll make sure he stays anyway.

I hear the heavy footsteps before I see him.

Father.

I stand in the hallway, watching him, my heart hammering in my chest. I can't stop the feeling rising up inside me. The anger. The need to protect.

Vaughn had tried to leave. I didn't want that. But I hadn't planned for this. I hadn't thought about what would happen once my father got here and stopped him for me.

I feel something tightening in my stomach as I watch. It isn't fear. It's a strange, bitter taste, a mix of frustration and something else that I can't quite place. Something that stings.

I see Father's hands grip Vaughn's arm and yank him back roughly.

"Where do you think you're going, boy?" he snarls, his voice low and dark. The question was rhetorical. He isn't waiting for an answer.

Vaughn tries to pull away, his eyes wide, but he doesn't scream. He never screams. Not yet. He is strong in a way I don't understand, that I've never seen before, but I admire it. The look on his face is a mixture of disbelief and defiance. He won't give my father the satisfaction of fear.

I'm proud of him for that.

But I'm not proud of what is about to happen.

Father drags Vaughn down the hall, not even looking back at me. He doesn't care that I'm still standing here, watching. He never does.

“You’ve been bad, haven’t you?” Anatoly mutters, as though talking to himself. He doesn’t need to make his threats sound like a question. He isn’t asking for Vaughn’s cooperation; he is announcing what is about to happen. He always speaks like that, like he already knows the answers, like he owns everyone in this house.

I can hear the sound of footsteps as they reach the basement door. I hear Vaughn’s voice, his attempts to make excuses, but his words get quieter as they are drowned out by the sound of the door slamming shut.

I move to the basement door, opening it silently and taking back my usual top at the top of the stairs, watching through the hole. Then, I can’t move. I just stand there in the shadows, frozen. Watching.

Father doesn’t stop with his usual threats. He doesn’t waste time with empty words. His anger is rising, and I can hear it in every step as he pulls Vaughn to his usual spot. The sounds of the struggle echo through the room, the force of Father’s hands on Vaughn’s body reverberating like thunder.

I should go to bed. I should stay where I’m supposed to, but I don’t.

I have to know.

I want to understand what is happening to Vaughn, and how I have gotten myself here. I want to know why it hurts so much to see him in pain.

I wait, listening for the sounds of their voices, my breath shallow.

Then I hear it.

A shout.

Not a loud one. But it is enough. It rattles through me, deep in my chest, like something inside me cracks.

Father is shouting at him now. I can hear the rage in his voice, can hear him telling Vaughn how weak he is, how he'll never get away from this house, how he is nothing more than a prisoner, nothing more than property.

And yet, Vaughn doesn't react like he should. Not the way anyone else would.

He doesn't beg. He doesn't even whimper.

It's like he has accepted it.

My father doesn't stop, though. The beatings grow harder. I watch as the slap of his palm hits against Vaughn's flesh, the thud of his fists, and the desperate gasps from Vaughn as he fights for air.

I can feel my heart pounding faster with every hit, but I stay frozen.

Every bone in my body wants to rush in. I want to tear Father away from him, throw myself between them, protect Vaughn, but I don't. I can't. Not yet.

Vaughn… he still doesn't beg. He stays silent for the most part, taking the punishment. It's painful, but it isn't fear.

It makes something inside of me tighten even further.

I'm not sure what I'm feeling anymore.

I'm not used to this.

I don't want to see Vaughn hurt. I hadn't meant for this to happen. I don't want my father's hands on him like that. I just wanted him to stay. I wanted him to be with me. I wanted to hear his voice, feel the tension between us again. I didn't want to watch him break.

Not anymore, not like when he first arrived. No, it's different now.

Father isn't stopping, though. His punishment is relentless, like he wants to remind Vaughn who is in charge here.

The guilt comes crashing in without warning.

I didn't want this. I didn't want Vaughn to suffer. I didn't want him to be hurt by anyone. Least of all my father.

But I don't know how to stop it.

I don't know how to fix it.

I brought Vaughn here. I made him stay. And now, I have to live with the consequences.

I turn away, my heart heavy with confusion. I can't bear to watch anymore. But I also can't leave him alone, even if he doesn't know he isn't alone.

I think about his face as he takes the beatings, strong with his teeth gritted. He looks like a ferocious bear, fierce and mighty. So little against my father's huge stature yet still filled with bravery beyond anything I've ever seen.

He is a Mishka. Little bear. That's what I'll call him now; it fits him perfectly.

My Mishka.

My feet carry me silently back up the stairs, and I have to grip the railing tightly to steady myself. I'm not sure if I'm angry at Father or at myself. Maybe both.

What have I done?

-

Present Day

Yulian

-

The woods stretch like a throat, dark and damp and eager to swallow me whole.

I adjust the earpiece in my ear, my breath barely audible as I crouch behind the thick base of a tree. Moss and decay fill the air, the earthy scent keeping me grounded. Above, the tall trees knit a canopy so dense even the moonlight has to fight for space.

“Alright,” Annie’s voice crackles softly through my ear, her tone even. “You’re in. Thirty feet ahead, there’s a gap in the perimeter. No cameras. Keep low.”

I don’t respond with words. Just a brief tap on my microphone as I slip through the undergrowth, my footsteps soundless. I’m wearing black head to toe. Despite the invitation in my phone and the fact everyone is given masks, I didn’t want to risk been recognised, so I’ve decided to find my own way in.

The adrenaline buzzes low in my veins, steady and familiar, but beneath it something warmer pulses- anticipation. As I move through the trees with predator grace, boots pressing into the wet laves without a sound, I thank my childhood self for perfecting my father’s ability to move in total silence.

“Okay, I’m tapping into the security feed now,” Annie murmurs. “Initiates are scattering already. The game’s begun.

My lips curl. “Perfect.”

My eyes scan the surrounding terrain. I can see the trails carved through the woods, the worn patches of leaves, the snapped branches,

the panic in the air. The initiates run through the darkness like prey, limbs flailing, lungs burning. Most of them won't reach the end. But that is the point.

I slip past one, a boy, judging by the outline of his body. And if the way it's shaking is anything to go by, a terrified boy at that. He clutches a thick stick in both hands, panting like a hunted rabbit.

Pathetic. As if my Mishka could ever be stopped by a *stick*.

"North sector's busy," Annie says. "Ten initiates clustered together. The Heathens have just left. Grace period is over."

"Noted," I say softly, voice almost swallowed by the wind. "Let me know if you get eyes on any of them, especially if they're close."

We both know who I'm here for, but I won't be admitting it out loud.

The trees creak as a gust of wind whistles through the branches. I pause behind a boulder, letting my eyes adjust to the minimal light. From this position, I can just make out a small clearly where a couple initiates run through together.

"Visual on a Heathen," Annie whispers, as if they could hear her. "Red Mask. Moving solo. Heading toward that clearing up ahead of you."

"Copy that."

I stay crouched low in my spot. I'm not interested it getting into it

with anyone but Vaughn tonight. A scream echoes from through the trees, along with cackling laughter. All of a sudden, an initiate bursts through the trees into the clearing, but before they even get halfway through it, Killian emerges behind them and whacks them over the head with his already bloodied bat.

A number is called through the speakers, signalling that initiate is now out.

To my left, I hear the telltale sounds of footsteps running. Judging by the way Killian's head snaps in my direction, he hears it too. However, after a second of staring, he turns his head and carries on.

Interesting. I suppose there is something else out here he's looking for.

I inhale deep and slow. I am in my element.

"This is a death trap," Annie mutters. Not in a way that suggests she is questioning my decision, however, but in a factual way. A statement.

"That's what makes it all the more fun," I grin.

Rising silently, I begin to move further into the woods. The deeper I go, the quieter it becomes. Not the kind that offers peace, but the kind that comes before a scream.

"Behind you. Hide." I hear Annie's voice say quickly. Without hesitation, I dive behind a tree.

I peak my head around it just in time for a tall man with the number eighty-nine to run past, only to almost crash straight into Killian. He pauses, clearly panicked. I glance behind him, only to see the yellow mask of Nikolai coming up behind him.

Poor guy, he has no chance. Those two will tear him apart like a tiger on a bunny rabbit.

Oh well. Not my problem.

Before they can see me, I take off running soundlessly in the opposite direction. Once I reach a clearer spot, I crouch down again.

“Bit of close one there, Annie,” I tell her. I’m not mad. The close call certainly got my blood pumping, but I do need to ensure she can do her job properly.

“Sorry, Boss. They were moving fast and came out of nowhere. I’ll do better next time.”

“Make sure you do.”

The sound of running water floods my ears. It’s light, not necessarily as it’s far away, but because it’s only a small amount. I take a few steps to the left, and as I thought, there is a small stream running through the trees, just between a small embankment, maybe a foot or so down.

I crouch beside it, dragging gloved fingers through the freezing water, washing a smudge of dirt from them. My reflection in the rippling water is distorted, but I can make out the grin on my face. For a

moment, I just stare. Then I splash the water, scattering the image apart.

“You’re close to the end. There isn’t much movement, barely anyone has made it this far yet.”

Hm. It wasn’t exactly difficult to make it here. Suppose the rest of them just aren’t very good. I do hope they don’t make it to the end. Mishka deserves better than these weaklings on his side.

A sudden crack rings out in the distance, wood snapping. I don’t flinch, only wipe my wet hands on my jacket and stand.

I gaze out through the thick trunks, but there isn’t a lot of visibility. I tilt my head.

“Annie,” I say, “got eyes on that clearing to my south-west?

I hear a click of a few buttons. “Yeah, hold on- wait, there’s a heat signature there. Let me pull up the cameras, see if it’s a Heathen.”

I wait a moment, before she comes back to me. “Nope, just an initiate. A pretty tall one at that, though, hold on.” She trails off in confusion.

“What is it?”

She takes a breath, and I hear more clicking on the keyboard. I’m not a very patient man.

“it’s-” I hear her say, “it’s Kayden.”

Huh. Guess he put that invite I sent him to good use.

What he could want here, I have no clue. But, it’s not exactly my priority right now and like I said, I’m not a very patient man.

“Just leave him be. Have you got eyes on Vaughn?”

To Annie’s credit, she doesn’t question why I’m looking for him specifically, just tells me she is searching. I wanted to play this lowkey and find him on my own, but I suppose I’ll have to resort to other methods.

“Found him,” Annie states.

“Well? Where is he?”

“He’s actually heading roughly in your direction. Start heading West and he should come from the South. You guys will meet in the middle.”

I let my lips curve into a smirk.

“Perfect. Look, Annie, tell me once I’m close. When I am, I’m going to take my earpiece out and turn the microphone off. If there is some sort of emergency, text me. Once you see I’m off the grounds, you can

head out.”

“Copy that.”

She doesn’t even question why I’d cut off all communication with her. This girl is certainly growing on me.

I take off in the right direction, every step calculated. I don’t know what the other Heathens had planned for tonight. With the way some of them were moving, they certainly have ulterior motives than just hunting initiates. But I don’t care. I only know one thing for certain:

I am here for Vaughn.

Not for revenge, peace or close. But for the feeling.

That dizzy, burning, maddening feeling Vaughn gives me. The one that makes every breath sharper and every other beat of my heart skip.

And maybe, if I am lucky, Vaughn will look at me again like he did that night in my bedroom. Not just with rage.

But with possession.

And maybe… maybe that ‘V’ on my chest wouldn’t be the only mark Vaughn leaves on me tonight.

-

Vaughn

-

The trees swallow the world whole.

They loom above me like ancient sentinels, letting through only fragments of light, enough to glint off the heavy chains coiled around my forearm. My boots crush the fallen leaves silently, deliberate and sharp, like I'm part of the forest's rhythm, not moving through it, but becoming part of it.

The initiation officially began fifteen minutes ago now. Long enough for most of the initiates to start panicking. Long enough for the weakest of them to get caught. I've already passed two knocked-out bodies and one poor bastard who can't get up due to an arrow through the leg, courtesy of Gareth.

I didn't bother helping him up.

A muffled yell echoes somewhere from behind me, followed by the sound of metal clashing. I roll my shoulders and keep walking.

I'm not in this for the chaos.

Well, maybe a little.

But mostly, I'm in it for him.

I'm not even certain Yulian will show up. The invite was sent like a knife through the dark, reckless, pointed, intentional. I never told the others. Couldn't. They'd ask too many questions. One I didn't have the answers to.

Why invite your enemy to a secret, violent, initiation in the middle of the dark woods?

Because I wanted him here.

To punish him.

To take revenge.

Because I can't stop thinking about him.

To understand something that still makes my chest feel tight every time I remember the video. The way Yulian looked into the camera, like it wasn't about Camilla at all. Like it was always about me.

I clench my fist around the chain. The cool weight of it grounds me.

Two initiates come crashing though the underbrush ahead. They look startled about seeing me. I don't even hesitate.

I strike first.

The chain whips through the air with a low, metallic hiss and wraps around the first one's ankle. I yank it back hard, sending him sprawling. The second lunges, but I duck beneath her poorly aimed fist and slam an elbow into her gut. A quick, practised strike with the end of the chain has her groaning in the dirt a second later.

I step over them without a second glance, my breathing slow, steady and calm.

Moving deeper into the trees, I follow a path only I can see. Everything is sharper out here, the air, the smells, the sounds. My senses scream with anticipation, and my mind keeps dragging me back to one image.

A pale chest.

A blood-red V.

I don't regret it. Not even a little.

But I do hate the way it makes me feel.

Branding Yulian should've been the start of the ultimate revenge. A warning, a declaration, a punishment. But all it had done was spart something twisted and possessive in Vaughn that I haven't been able to put out since. My fingers still tingle at the memory. My mouth goes dry every time the image returns.

And it returns a lot.

I push a low-hanging branch aside and pause in my step. My eyes scan the shadows.

Nothing. Just wind and leaves. Just my heartbeat pulsing behind my teeth.

I don't even know what exactly I'll do if I do find Yulian. Chain him up? Beat the shit out of him? Something else entirely?

Get a grip, I tell myself.

And yet my eyes keep searching the dark flicker of motion that feels so familiar. For a shadow that doesn't quite belong. For a voice I'd recognise even in unconsciousness.

I can even hear it now. The Russian smoothness wrapped in madness.

I hate how much I crave it.

Another scream cuts through the woods, distant and fleeting. I don't turn, don't even flinch. I don't care.

Let the others play their games.

I have my own hunt to complete.

As I walk further, I begin to feel it. The tightening of my spine, the buzzing beneath my skin.

I'm close.

Yulian is here. I know it the way animals know storms before they hit.

And this storm is about to break.

-

There.

Movement.

I crouch low, slipping behind a gnarled trunk of old pine. My breath slows, the thudding of my chest evening out as I focus. Twenty paces a head, a figure moves between the trees, fluid, deliberate, familiar.

His whole outfit is black and fits him to perfection. The stride he walks with is wrong for a regular initiate. Too smooth, too cocky. Too silent.

There's only one person I know who is that big, yet able to walk with such silence.

Then he turns his head just enough for a bit of moonlight to catch his profile.

Yulian.

Back turned, hands loose at his side. Head tilted like he is listening to the forest breath.

As soon as I see him, it's like something clicks in my brain. I don't even hesitate.

I move quickly, slipping from trunk to trunk. The chain uncoils from my hand, trailing like a predator's tail behind me. He is six paces away.

Now four.

Two.

One.

I strike.

The chain snaps forward and loops around Yulian's arm with a sharp clink. I yank it back hard, spinning him around, but Yulian only laughs, low and breathless, as if he's been expecting it.

"Well, well," Yulian purrs, voice smooth as silk, "if it isn't my favourite stalker."

"Shut up," I growl, driving him backward with another tug of the chain.

Yulian stumbles but recovers quickly, his back hitting a thick tree trunk with a solid thud. His grin never faulters. I wrap my chain around his throat.

He cackles manically. “Love it when you get rough, Mishka.”

This only serves to piss me off even more and I yank my chain forward, catching him off guard as he falls to the floor. I drag him across the ground with my chain while he grips at his neck.

Allowing my chain to slip loose, I straddle him, punching him across the face.

He grins up at me. “Guess this means you missed me, then?”

“Never, motherfucker,” I snarl.

“You wound me.”

“Not yet. But I’m about to.”

I use my chain to force his hands behind his back and his breath catches. But he doesn’t sound like he is in pain, more like anticipation. I slam a fist into his ribs, hard enough to make him gasp.

I don’t know what’s come over me right now. I just feel so angry. All the pent up rage from the last few days, of these feelings about him,

for him, that I can't control, that I don't want, are unleashing themselves onto him through my rage.

Still, Yulian laughs. "You always go straight for the body. Should I feel flattered or worried?"

"Shut the hell up."

"You're mad." Yulian tilts his head slightly, a blood trailing from the corner of his mouth where I've split his lip. "Because of the girl? Camilla, was it?"

I know he's only pretending to barely remember her to piss me off. But it's working. I go still.

He smiles up at me. "I knew it."

"You think this is a joke?" I hiss at him, pressing him harder to the floor. "You think what you did to her, what you did to me, was funny?"

"I think she was boring," Yulian muses. "I think she wanted to get back at you, and she used me to do it. But I didn't mind playing along. Especially when I realised I could show you just the person you were dating. You should thank me, really-"

My fist slams into his stomach, knocking the wind out of him.

He doubles over slightly, wheezing.

“I hate you,” I grit at him. It comes out choked.

“No, you don’t,” Yulian rasps, his voice rough. “You just hate that you want me.”

My grip on the chain falters and he uses it to his advantage. Twisting in my grip, he swings his fist and catches me in the jaw. Sharp. Clean. It rattles through my skull.

I stumble back, then surge forward, shoulder-checking him back to the ground.

Yulian rolls and kicks out, knocking my legs out from under me. We hit the dirt together, scrambling like animals. I slam my elbow into his shoulder, but Yulian catches me by the waist and throws me over.

The world spins.

I hit the ground with a grunt, the chain falling from my hand. Yulian is on top of me now, straddling my hips, pinning my wrists to the forest floor.

Breathing hard. Eyes bright. Wild.

“This,” Yulian’s voice is low, “is what I wanted. Since the basement. Since I first saw you. Angry. Bleeding. Mine.”

My pulse roars in my ears.

How fucking dare he say that? How dare he speak of the basement like he doesn't know what he did down there. That traitorous little-

Fuck.

I'm so angry I can hardly breath.

"I'm going to kill you," I growl.

"But you won't," Yulian says. "Because-" he leans down, pressing his forehead to mine, "-this is better than any revenge."

I surge up, headbutting him as hard as I can, breaking the contact.

Yulian rolls off me, laughing through bloodied lips as he lies beside me. For a moment, I go to hit him again, only to feel a wave of nausea, likely from the hit to my head. So, I remain where I am.

"You're insane," I spit.

"Only for you."

"You're out of your mind."

“I’ve always been out of my mind. You just make it worse.”

I turn my head, chest heaving, heart racing.

I should’ve attacked.

I should’ve ended it.

But all I could do was stare.

Because Yulian, insane grinning, taunting Yulian, looked beautiful in the shadows. Like a nightmare made into flesh. Like a fever I don’t want to break. I don’t even know where the thought comes from. But once it’s there, I can’t escape it.

Yulian turns his head toward me. “Well?” he asks. “What happens next, darling?”

I don’t answer because truthfully, I don’t know.

-

The world is still spinning.

I remain flat on my back, chest calmed down, chain coiled loosely in one hand. The coppery taste of blood sits heavy on my tongue. Leaves and dirt cling to my shirt while my ribs ache something awful.

Beside me, Yulian still lies sprawled like he doesn't have a single care in the world. One arm tucked behind his head, the other resting on his stomach, which slowly rises and falls.

Its been a few minutes since we stopped fighting and some weird sense of eerie truce has washed over us, though it remains thick with tension.

"Didn't know you had it in you," Yulian says, voice hoarse but full of pride. "That last hit? Damn near cracked my jaw."

I don't answer. My throat feels tight, not with words, but with everything else.

The silence stretches between us, punctuated only by the distant echoes of shouting. Somewhere in the woods, the initiation rages on, bodies slamming, weapons swinging, chaos in every direction.

But here, in this pocket of broken branches and trampled earth, there is only us.

"I didn't come here for this," I finally say, my voice low. I'm not even sure what I mean by that exactly. I just know that lying beside him quietly, covered in bruises, was certainly not what I thought would happen when we encountered each other next.

"Sure, you did." Yulian turns his head toward me. "You came for me."

My jaw flexes. "Shut up."

Yulian chuckles softly, then winces, letting out a sigh. “You’ve said. Many times.”

I say nothing.

“You’ve made your point for today, Vaughn. Now what?” he asks me, and I don’t know what to say.

My jaw hangs open for a second as my mind races.

“Now,” I sigh, “now I go finish what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“Why?” Yulian questions so simply it pisses me off.

“I mean,” Yulian says, propping himself up on an elbow, “you’re not going to get anything out of this. You’ll be some people up, meet up with your boys, act like it all means something. But you and I both know it doesn’t.”

I look him in the eyes. “And what does?”

Yulian’s gaze holds mine steady. “This.” He gestures between us. “Whatever the hell this is.”

I look away fast.

“Leave with me. Right now.”

My head jerks back toward him in shock. I was not expecting him to say that. But his face, for once in his life, appears serious.

I let out a choked laugh at first as I’m in so much surprise at the suggestion. Then I scoff. “You want me to just walk away from the initiation? Are you insane?”

“Yes,” Yulian says, without missing a beat. “But’s that’s not the point.”

“Then what is?”

“We’re both in pain right now. The initiation’s likely almost over. If we stay here any longer, someone will catch us. And I have a feeling you don’t want that to happen.”

He’s right, but I don’t say anything.

“The other Heathens can handle the rest. We’ve been circling each other for years, especially these last few weeks. You came here to hurt me, and you did. I let you. Hell, I wanted you to.”

He sits up fully, brushing dirt off his gloved palms. “But what if we, for once, just stop the performance. Just for tonight.”

I stare at him blankly. “And do what?”

Yulian grins faintly. “Whatever you want. I know these woods extend beyond the initiation perimeter. We could walk out there. Even beat each other up again if you’d like.”

I close my eyes, shaking my head. “You’re unbelievable.”

“And yet, you’re still here.”

Another long pause.

I roll my head to the side, studying the man beside me. “They’re going to notice I’m gone.”

Yulian shrugs. “You’ll say you chased me off into the woods. Couldn’t find me. Got bored.”

“You really think I can just walk away?”

“I think you already did,” Yulian says, voice lower now. “You just haven’t stood up yet.”

Something inside me shifts. Or breaks. Or clicks into place.

I despise the man next to me. He destroyed my trust when we were children. Betrayed me. He has taunted me for years, ruined my relationship by fucking my girlfriend. She killed herself over it and that’s something I’ll always live with.

He plays with me every chance he gets. He enjoys it, loves it. The videos he sends me, the teasing texts. He has lured me in until I can't stop thinking about him, obsessing over him almost as much as he does me. I've branded him and even that wasn't enough. I've sworn to get my revenge, and I still want that.

He is the villain in my story. He has been in my past and will be in my future.

But right now-

Right now, I'm tired. I look at him, sitting up. My whole-body protests. My knuckles are bruised, my chest burns but suddenly, I'm inexplicably lighter.

The correct thing to do is to say no. Hell, the best thing to do is to knock him out, bring him back to the mansion and kill him. Yet, for a reason I still can't admit to myself, for a feeling that just keeps returning over and over and over, I don't.

"Okay," I mutter.

Yulian blinks. "Wait, seriously?"

"I said okay, didn't I?"

A beat of stunned silence.

Then Yulian grins wide, breathless with something that looks a lot like

wonder.

“God, I love when you surprise me.”

I grab my chain, climbing to my feet, glaring at him. “Don’t make me change my mind.”

Yulian stands too, brushing himself off. “Wouldn’t dream of it.”

We stare at each other a second longer, raw, battered, something unspoken humming between us like static.

Then I turn and start walking.

I can’t hear him, but I know he is following.

And together, we vanish into the shadows of the woods, leaving the chaos, the initiation and everything else behind.

Just for tonight.

-

The yelling and rustling of the initiation has faded into the distance now, far behind us, swallowed up by the thick trees and the blanket of night. All that’s left it the sound of our footsteps crunching over leaves and the occasional branch snapping underfoot.

I keep my hands tucked into my jacket pockets, my chain coiled tight inside one of them, just in case. I'm not stupid. I might've left the initiation with Yulian, but that doesn't mean I trust him.

Yulian, on the other hand, walks like we are two best friends on a midnight stroll. Like he hasn't spent the last half an hour taunting, fighting and nearly getting choked out.

Typical.

"This reminds me of that one horror movie," Yulian tells me, voice too cheerful for someone with a busted lip. "Y'know, the one with the campers who got eaten alive in the woods?"

I don't respond. Just keep walking.

Yulian bumps his shoulder against mine. "If a monster jumps out, I'm throwing you at it."

"You can try," I mutter.

Yulian chuckles, the sound low and raspy from all the exertion. "You still don't like to talk much, huh? You've always been that way, I suppose."

The casual reference to us knowing each other as children has me clenching my jaw. If he keeps mentioning that, this is going to get violent again real quick.

“I’m keeping an eye out.”

“For what? Angry tree squirrels?”

I give him a sideways look. “You.”

Yulian presses a hand to his chest, reigning hurt. “Still don’t trust me after everything we’ve been through? I’m hurt.

Okay, he really needs to stop with the references to trust and our childhood. It’s like this prick doesn’t even care about what he did.

“You should be.”

Yulian snorts. “Come on. You left your murder club just to walk off into the woods with me. That has to mean something.”

I look ahead. The trees are starting to thin just slightly, the moon filtering a little easier now. My boots leave clear prints in the soft dirt.

“Why are you really here?” I ask, voice low. “Why did you come tonight?”

Yulian shrugs, but the edge of amusements has dulled. “I was invited.”

“Don’t bullshit me.”

“Okay,” Yulian says. He tucks his hands into his pockets, watching me closely. “I came because you wanted me to. Whether you knew it or not. You’ve been pulling me to you for a while now.”

“I should’ve left you on the ground,” I mutter, turning away.

“And yet you didn’t.”

We walk in silence again for a few minutes. The air is colder now, as nighttime truly emerges. Quieter too. Like the world has paused, just for us.

Eventually Yulian breaks the silence. His voice is softer this time. Less teasing.

“Do you ever wonder what it would’ve been like if we met differently?”

I don’t respond.

“No basement.”

I flinch.

“No mafia,” Yulian continues, “no chains or cameras or bruises. Just… I don’t know. A party. Or a lecture. Or a train.

I still don’t answer him, but I grip my fists in tight balls.

Sensing my reluctance to answer, he says no more on the topic.

We reach a small clearing, with a log long-fallen and covered in moss. I sit without a word, elbows on my knees, breathing a little harder than before.

Yulian doesn't sit right away. He stands in front of me, staring up at the sliver of moon visible through the trees. Then he glances down at me.

"You're allowed to relax, y'know," he tell me. "I'm not going to stab you."

I look at him.

Yulian's crazed grin returns. "Not tonight, anyway."

I let out a breath and after a pause, I gesture loosely at the log beside me.

Yulian doesn't hesitate; he just sits.

With him in such close proximity to me, I can't stop thinking. I can feel his presence around me like the hair on my skin.

Why did I invite him. Why did I *really* invite him?

I shouldn't have walked away from the initiation with him. I shouldn't be sitting here, alone, in the middle of the goddamn woods with Yulian Dmitriev.

I stare straight ahead, fists clenched between my knees, the chain coiled too tightly in my pocket like it could lash out at any second.

And yet here Yulian sits beside me. Like we are old friends. Like we haven't just beat the shit out of each other. Like there isn't a war between us, stretching back years and marked by bruises, blood, betrayals and other things neither of us ever say out loud.

"I can feel you thinking," Yulian says suddenly, breaking the quiet. "Thinking about me?" he smirks.

I don't look at him.

Yulian leans in slightly, his head so close to my ear I can feel his warm breath. "You want to hate me so badly."

"You make it easy."

"And yet here we are."

I stand. "You think this means something? This, whatever this is?"

"Don't act like I'm the only one who feels it."

“I don’t,” I state. It comes out too fast, too harsh. I can already feel the lie burning in my mouth.

Yulian stands slowly, too close now. “No?”

“I’m not like you,” I bite out. “I don’t obsess. I don’t follow people. I don’t break them just because I can.”

“No, you just chain them to trees and whisper threats in their ears,” Yulian grits, stepping closer, “much healthier.”

The lies are spilling from my lips, and I don’t know how to stop them. It’s gone too far now. I can’t take them back. But things are going too fast, and I need them to slow down.”

“I shouldn’t have come here with you.”

“And yet, here you are.”

“I hate you.”

“You wish you did.”

We just keep going in circles, repeating the same things over and over again.

I shove him. Hard.

Yulian staggers back but doesn't fall. He laughs, low and heavy, and pushes me right back.

"You want to do this again?" he asks, eyes glinting, wild with something between rage and pleasure. "Find. Come on. Hit me again."

I do.

It was instinct. It was a need.

We're grappling now, all tension and heat, fists gripping clothes, slamming each other, pushing and pulling like we are trying to tear the last threat between us. Instead, it just feels like we are turning, twisting and knotting them even more. Becoming more entwined with one another with every movement. Yulian's hand fists my jacket, my knee presses into his thigh. It's messy, angry, desperate.

Growling with frustration, I shove him away one last time, turning my back on him and begin walking away.

I'm done with this, done with him. For tonight at least, I can't deal with-

I feel Yulian grab my wrist, pulling me back toward him and spinning me around.

Then his lips are on mine.

For a split second, I freeze. I'm not expecting it.

Then everything inside me detonates.

The kiss isn't gentle. It's raw. Furious. Our teeth clash. I grab the front of Yulian's coat, meaning to push him away, but my hands don't listen. Instead, they pull him closer. Closer.

We kiss hard and rough. I push him back until he's against a tree, our tongues intertwining. My earlier injuries ache and I'm sure his do too, but they make me feel nothing in comparison to the burning that floods through me. Then, he uses his strength to flip us around so it's my back against the tree, and a small moan escapes me.

Where the fuck did that come from?

I barely have time to register the thought before I'm swept up in him again.

It makes no sense. It's pure chaos. It's wrong and right and too much and not enough. My brain is screaming but my body is starving, and something deep inside of me, something dangerous and hidden, craves this. Has for a very long time.

Yulian's mouth is hot and demanding, his grip possessive. I can taste the coppery blood on it, left by my own hand. I gasp into his lips, breath caught somewhere between a growl and a moan.

What the fuck is happening?

Why does this feel like-

Like everything.

Like I've been waiting my whole life for someone to touch me like this, to kiss me like I'm the centre of gravity itself. Like nothing else in the world mattered.

My head spins. My hands dig into Yulian's back, nails biting though fabric. Every time I think I might pull away, Yulian kisses me harder, deeper, hungrier, until I can't think, can't breathe.

His lips are still on mine when the shift happens.

I barely feel it at first, a hand sliding down my chest, then my stomach, fingers gripping the edge of my belt, tugging. The kiss slows, deepens, turning more deliberate. Hungrier.

Yulian presses closer, lips moving to trail down my neck, breath hot as he murmurs, "tell me to stop."

But my hands don't move from where they press him to me.

I don't say a word.

Yulian kisses lower, and I feel the distinct press of something thick, long and hard press against me. A sensation jolts something inside me. Something real. Something too real.

My mind stutters. Flashes.

A basement. Rope burns on my wrists. Blood dried at the corner of my mouth. A boy with wide, curious eyes sneaking me food like I wasn't a prisoner. Like a wasn't his enemy. Like he wasn't lying to me the entire time.

And then-

The video.

Camilla's voice. Yulian's hands.

His fucking laugh spilling from that curved smirk.

And now this.

This heat, this need. This mistake.

I shove him back, hard.

Yulian stumbles away, his brows pulling together as he licks his swollen, red lips. "Mishka-"

"Don't," my voice cracks like a whip. "Don't fucking call me that. And don't fucking touch me."

Yulian tilts his head, expression unreadable, but I can see the flicker behind it. The confusion, the faint edge of hurt.

But then Yulian smirks. “Didn’t seem like you minded a second ago.”

“I wasn’t thinking.”

“Clearly.”

My chest heaves. Shame pours in fast and acidic. “This is what you do, isn’t it?” I hiss. “You play with people. You get into their heads. Fuck with them until they don’t even recognise themselves.”

Yulian shrugs one shoulder, the act too smooth to be sincere. “Or maybe you’re just scared of what you actually want.”

“Don’t flatter yourself.”

“Oh, Mishka,” he purrs, but his voice falters, just slightly. “Come on. You going to pretend that didn’t mean anything?”

“It didn’t,” my words cut like glass. “It was a mistake.”

Yulian’s jaw tenses for a heartbeat before he masks it behind a chuckle. “Well. You sure know how to kill a mood.”

I turn away.

“Run along then,” Yulian calls from behind me, but I’m already moving away. “Go pretend you’re someone you’re not.”

I don’t answer. Don’t look back.

I storm through the trees, heart pounding like a war drum in my ears. Each step of the way feels like a dragging a chain behind me, heavy and loud. And even as I leave, even as I try and bury it, my lips still burn.

With the taste of a man I’m supposed to hate.

-

As soon as I’m near the mansion, I immediately send a text for the plane to be readied for me. I barely stick around after that. Just long enough to ensure the initiation is over, then it’s straight to the plane.

I shoot Jeremy a text apologising, making up a lie about my father asking me to come home. Whether he actually believes it or not, I don’t know. But he doesn’t question it, so I take it as a win.

I should’ve known better. Never should’ve sent the invitation. Never sought him out. Never kissed him back.

I press my forehead against the window to cool down, jaw clenched enough to hurt. The hum of the engine fills the silence around me, a static buzz that doesn’t drown out the riot in my head. What the fuck am I doing?

I'm supposed to hate Yulian. I do hate Yulian. That's the whole point. That was the only reason I let myself get close again, because I want revenge. Because I need to remind Yulian who he is messing with.

And yet-

That kiss.

God, that kiss.

It hadn't felt like vengeance. It had felt like surrender.

Like my brain stopped working and all that was left was heat and instinct and the way Yulian's body pressed into mine like we were made to ruin each other.

I shut my eyes. My fingers curl into fists on my thighs. This isn't me.

This isn't who I'm supposed to be.

I am the heir. The future Pakhan. The one who does everything right. Who protects his people, makes smart choices, keeps my emotions chained and buried.

But with Yulian… there are no chains. No logic. Just chaos.

And desire.

And fury.

And history tangled so deep in our bones, I don't know where hate ends, and obsession begins.

I need distance. I crave it. It is the only way to breathe again. The only way to remember who I am.

Going back to the States, it's damage control. It's survival.

Because if I stayed in the UK even one more night, I don't know where I would end up.

And I'm not sure I would survive it.

So, for now… I'll put an ocean between us. Maybe it will be enough. Maybe it won't.

But it is all I have.

-

Yulian

-

I lie on the forest floor long after Vaughn leaves.

The leaves are cold beneath my back, the sky veiled in black. And I can't stop grinning.

It wasn't that it didn't sting, the way Vaughn shoved me back, eyes full of disgust and betrayal. That part… yeah, that cut a little. Maybe more than a little. I'm not entirely heartless.

But it couldn't erase what came before.

Vaughn kissed me back.

Not just kissed me, wanted me.

It may have been my own hard cock that helped snap him out of our trance in one another, but not before I felt his own pressed against me.

I press my fingers to my lips, almost reverently. They still burn. Every nerve is still high on the memory. That brutal heat. The way Vaughn grabbed me like he hated me, yet needed me. Like he wanted to rip me apart and keep me all at once.

And I had felt alive in a way I haven't in years.

I roll onto my side, resting my head against my hand, staring at the spot where Vaughn had stood. Where I touched him. Where his voice had cracked and his breath faltered and for just one, perfect moment… Vaughn had let his mask slip.

I saw the truth in his yes.

He wanted me.

He always had. I know it.

Even if he hated it too. Even if he was willing to fly across the damn world just to escape it. To escape me. It didn't change the facts.

I've tasted him now.

And I certainly will again.

My grin widens as I sit up, brushing dirt off my coat. My pulse still hasn't slowed, my chest light and fluttering like a damn teenager.

This isn't the end. Not even close.

This is the beginning.

I've waited years already. Years. Watching from a distance, taunting him, hurting him, seeking him out in the only twisted way I knew how- and now?

Now I've had a piece of him. A glimpse of what it could be like if the war between us burned into something else.

Something hotter. Wilder.

Realer than anything either of us have ever known. Vaughn can run to the ends of the Earth if he wants. I'll find him. Not to chase. Not to beg.

But to remind him of what it felt like when we touched. When we stopped pretending.

When we gave it.

The storm has just started. Vaughn just doesn't know he is already in it. He won't walk away so easily.

Chapter End Notes

> hope you enjoyed! i literally had so much fun writing this. i actually found it one of the easiest chapters to write. it very much just flowed as i wrote it and other than the flashback, i pretty much wrote the whole thing in one sitting (with my plan obvs). hope i did such a big part of the story justice and it lived up to your expectations. i tried my best to follow cannon as i do with all chapters but tbh i think even rina forgets her own cannon sometimes as while planning this ive actually found quite a few inconsistencies in the timeline while trying to sort my own haha. thanks you so much for reading :).

Chapter Seven

Chapter Notes

helooo. this is pretty much a filler chapter tbh, sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Vaughn

-

The pain is white-hot and relentless. Every breath scrapes fire through my ribs, and I think something might actually be broken this time. My face aches. My wrists burn. The ropes bite deeper every time I move, but I can't stop pulling at them anyway. I want to tear them apart. Tear something apart.

The basement is dark again. Cold. The concrete beneath me is stained red and damp, and I feel disgusting. Like something rotting in a cage.

I can't believe I actually thought-

I thought he might help me.

God, I'm so stupid.

My jaw clenches, fury crawling under my skin like something alive. My eyes sting, not from tears, I won't give him that satisfaction, but from the fury of betrayal. He fed me. Talked to me. Smiled at me. Like we were... friends or something.

And then he opened his fucking mouth and screamed for his father.

I should've known. Should've known better than to trust someone like him.

The basement door creaks open slowly. I freeze. My body tenses with instinct and pain, neck craning toward the noise. I half expect Anatoly's heavy footsteps, his shouting, the crack of a belt or a fist.

But it's not him.

It's Yulian.

He slips inside quietly, like he's trying not to wake me. He's wearing some oversized hoodie, sleeves pulled over his hands like a kid who knows he's not supposed to be here.

I glare so hard I feel my head throb with it.

He steps closer, pausing a few feet away. "Vaughn…" he says softly, like he doesn't want to scare me.

"Get the fuck away from me."

It comes out hoarse, sharp, all venom. I sound like hell and feel worse, but I don't care. I want him to hear it. I want him to choke on it.

He flinches. Just a little. His shoulders curl inward, and for once, he doesn't have that smug little look on his face. Just wide, stupid eyes like I'm the one who hurt him.

"What are you doing down here?" I spit, yanking at the ropes even though it makes my wrists bleed. "Come to watch? Cheer your sick bastard father on?"

He takes a small step closer. "No. I didn't know he was going to-"

"Bullshit."

He flinches again.

I can't hit him. I can't move. But I want to. God, I want to wipe that look off his face. The one that says he didn't mean it. That he didn't just feed me to the fucking wolf.

"I should've known you were playing me," I growl. "Pretending to be kind so I'd let my guard down. You really are your father's son."

He doesn't say anything. He just stands there, mouth open like he wants to explain, but no sound comes out. And for once, that silence pisses me off more than anything else he could've said.

"You think this is some game?" I snap. "You liked having your little pet down here to talk to? Feed scraps to?"

He shakes his head quickly, hair falling into his eyes. "That's not-"

“Then what? What the hell was it, Yulian?”

He doesn’t answer. Just watches me with something weird in his face. Something I can’t name. Like he’s confused too. Like he doesn’t get why I’m so angry, why this hurts.

Maybe he really doesn’t.

Maybe that’s what makes it worse.

I turn my face away. My throat is raw. “Just leave,” I mutter. “I don’t want to see you.”

Instead, I hear him shuffle closer.

I hear the rustle of him crouching down.

“I really am sorry, Vaugh, I just didn’t want you to leave,” he says.

I laugh, short and bitter. “Yeah, I got that. Thanks for the souvenir.”

He flinches, but stays.

“I just didn’t want to be alone,” he says. “You… you were talking to me. Laughing. You ate the food I brought. No one ever-” He cuts himself off. “I liked it.”

I finally glance at him. He's sitting cross-legged now, knees pulled in. Looks more like a sulky kid than the heir of a psycho.

"I didn't mean for him to hurt you," he adds. "I wasn't thinking about that. I just thought, if you left, that would be it. No more talking. No more… you."

I breathe in, sharp and shaky. I should scream at him. Or ignore him. Or something. But instead, I ask:

"Do you always sneak out at night?"

He blinks. "What?"

"To come down here. Do you sneak out, or does he just not care?"

"Oh." He rubs the back of his neck. "I sneak. He doesn't know. If he knew I was talking to you like this, he'd probably lose it."

I snort. "Yeah. He seems stable."

Yulian smiles faintly. "He's not."

There's a pause.

Then-

“I used to sneak out of my room all the time. Back home,” I mutter. “Me and my cousin, the one I said was like a sister, used to do it all the time when she’d have sleepovers.”

“Why?”

“Just for fun, really. To see how far we could get without getting caught. Our parents always knew, I’m sure. They’re way too smart not to. But they realised how much fun we had doing it, so they let us.”

Yulian tilts his head, watching me. “What would you do?”

“Whatever we wanted. Steal food from the kitchen, try and listen in on the adults conversations, watch TV on the lowest volume.”

“That does sound fun.” he murmurs.

I shrug. “It was.”

We’re quiet for a beat.

Then he says, “And do you ever get caught?”

“Occasionally. Like I said, they always know we are doing it, but if they suspect we get too close to doing something dangerous they usually ‘catch’ us.”

Yulian lets out a small, real laugh.

It almost sounds normal.

“I’d probably break my neck if I tried to climb anything,” he says. “I’ve got the worst balance. Even in training, I trip over my own damn feet. My dad always complains about it, says it’ll impact how good I am at staying silent while walking. I’m working on improving it though, with his help.”

“You? The great Yulian?” I fake gasp. “Say it ain’t so.”

He smirks, eyes flickering with something familiar. “Shut up.”

For a second, it’s almost easy. Comfortable. Like we’re just two kids stuck in the same boring house and trying to kill time. Not… this.

Not prisoners and jailers. Not traitors and victims.

He looks at me again, longer this time, quieter.

“I’m still pissed at you,” I say before he can speak.

“I know.”

“But… I don’t know. Talking like this doesn’t suck.”

He nods slowly. “Yeah. It doesn’t. I swear, I really didn’t want you to get hurt. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so angry than when I saw him beating you like that.”

I don’t reply. Then we sit in the silence. It’s not quite peace, not yet. But it’s not war either.

It’s a pause.

And for now, I’ll take that.

-

Present Day

Vaughn

-

It’s been two weeks.

Fourteen days.

Three hundred and thirty-six hours.

And I still can’t get him out of my head.

I told myself that flying back to New York was the right decision. The only decision. Putting distance between us was the best thing to do. I could start breathing again. But I feel like I haven’t taken a full breath

since the moment I left him standing in that goddamn forest. I stepped onto that plane like I was reclaiming control, except I haven't been in control since the second his lips touched mine.

Yulian.

His name echoes constantly around my head, repeating in the space between my ribs, like a bruise that just won't fade.

I keep telling myself it was just the moment. Just adrenaline. Just proximity. But that kiss- fuck. That kiss ruined me. I remember everything about it. The heat, the force. The desperation. The way he tasted like blood and danger and all the things I'm supposed to hate.

And yet, I still want more.

I lean against my headboard, dragging a hand through my hair. I've put my apartment up for sale now. There are too many memories I want to forget here. Too many ghosts. I'm in the process of buying another as while I do love my parents, I don't want to live with them right now. I'm afraid they'll notice something is wrong and question me about it, and I have no idea what I would answer them with.

I've tried to distract myself. Tried to drown myself in work, both school and Mafia, along with mindless TV and expensive vodka. But every time I close my eyes, I see him. That goddamn smirk. Those eyes that look straight through me. The way he fought me like he knew me, like he has been waiting for it.

I hate the way he made me feel alive.

My chest rises and falls sharply as I sit up a little, my hands resting on my stomach. I try not to think about it. About that way his breath mingled with mine. The way his hand had gripped the back of my neck, possessive and unrelenting, like he was claiming me.

My fingers curl, nails digging into my palms.

It was a mistake. A moment of weakness. I hate him.

And yet…

My thoughts slip back to that tree, to the sound of the forest floor around us and the heat of his body pressed against mine. My skin burns with it again. I shift uncomfortably, biting the inside of my cheek, willing the image away, but it only sharpens.

I remember the way he whispered my name between bites of breath, like it meant something. Like I meant something.

Before I can stop myself, my hand slips lower. Just to take the edge off. Just to silence the noise.

But it isn't quiet.

It is him, always him. The memory of his mouth, his voice, the way he looked at me like I was already his.

My head tips back, eyes fluttering shut. I feel my hand wrap around my hardened cock.

“Fuck,” whisper into the dark.

I should stop. I want to stop.

But I don’t.

I let the memory pull me under, let it wreck me all over again. My breath hitches, ragged and rough. My hand moves faster beneath my sweats. I don’t want to admit what it means, that I’m so far gone, I can’t even touch myself without thinking of him.

It doesn’t take long. I come with a stifled gasp, jaw clenched, pulse racing. My heart feels like it might tear out of my chest.

Silence returns.

I stare at the ceiling, the guilt washing out me in waves. I hate myself for giving in. For wanting him. For needing that feeling again.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. He wasn’t supposed to have this kind of power over me.

And yet… even as I sit here, sweat cooling on my skin and stickiness drying on my hand, the ache in my chest deepens.

Because all I can think about, still, is going back.

-

The words on the projector blur together again. They've been doing that a lot lately.

I barely even know what we're learning about. I don't really care. The professor's voice has become background noise, like a distant hum I can't quite tune out.

I sit motionless near the back of the lecture hall, word document open in front of me, but still blank. Every now and then, I type something random to make it seem like I'm doing something but quickly erase it afterward. But none of it registers. It's like trying to study underwater.

Around me, other students type away on their laptops, whisper to one another, occasionally laugh at something the professor says. I watch them, disconnected. Like I'm not actually in the room.

It's been happening since I got back. Since him.

My leg bounces under the desk, jittery with static energy I can't shake. I feel like I'm constantly vibrating, like there is something crawling under my skin. Sleep has become foreign to me. Every night I lay awake staring at the ceiling, replaying the same moment over and over again like a curse.

That kiss. That fucking kiss.

It has carved itself into me.

And it isn't just that. It's his voice, too. His eyes. His smirk. His chain of chaos that trails behind him like a second shadow. He is in my head, under my skin, behind my ribs.

I blink and realise we have moved onto another slide.

I can't focus. I haven't been able to since I stepped off that plane. I thought distance would fix things, make them quieter, but it's louder than ever. The absence of him is somehow more suffocating than being near him.

My hand clenches around my thigh.

He kissed me like he meant it. Like he owned me. And worse… I let him. I kissed him back like I wanted to be owned. Wanted to own him right back.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

I swore I'd never be that stupid again. I wouldn't let him under my skin, not after what he did. Not after Camilla. Not after the basement.

But now the wall I built is cracking.

I shove my laptop into my bag. Class isn't over, but I'm done pretending. I sling my bag over my shoulder and leave without a word. I have a meeting with my father and the other leaders soon, anyway. Dad wants me to sit in on them so I can learn from them.

It's for the best I leave now, because if I stayed any longer, I'm going to start thinking about the next time I'll see him. And I'm not sure I want to stop myself.

-

The long oak table is surrounded by people who command respect, not just because they demanded it, but because they are it.

And I'm supposed to be one of them. Supposed to be their leader, one day.

Around me are several faces I've known my entire life; people I call aunts and uncles. Rai Sokolov, Adrian Volkov, Damien Orlov, to name a few. My mother is here too, she isn't always, but today she is.

I sit in my usual seat at the right hand of my father, posture straight, face neutral, hands clasped in front of me. I look the part. But that's all there is, a look.

Because I haven't heard a single word that has been said in the last twenty minutes.

Something about moving product through Boston. A shipment delay by the docks. Plans to extend our relationship with the Yakuza. It's been strong ever since Uncle Damien married Aunt Mio and I'm sure it will only get better under my fathers' leadership. And hopefully mine, too. All of it slides past my ears like water, however, my focus shattered, my mind elsewhere.

In the woods.

On that kiss.

On him.

Its ridiculous. Like I'm just going round and round in circles, repeating myself and my thoughts over and over.

I blink hard and adjust my lie like it choking me. A few people glance my way, subtle and brief. They don't say anything, but of course they won't. I'm Vaughn Morozov, heir to the New York Bratva.

Still, I feel the weight of their stares. They aren't blind. They know I'm not here with them, not mentally. They all know I've been off since everything with Camilla happened. And especially since I got back from the UK.

The meeting eventually comes to a close, voices rising as chairs scrape the floor. One by one the men fill out, nodding their respects to my dad. He remains seated at the head of the table, expression unreadable, watching them all leave. My mother stops by his side, whispering into his ear, prompting a shake of his head in return. He kisses her fiercely, never one to shy away from PDA, then she leaves too.

He turns to me. "Stay a minute," he says, low and calm.

I don't flinch. I already knew this was coming, but my pulse ticks faster. I remain in my seat.

The door shuts behind the last man, and suddenly the silence of the room feels louder than all the noise before it.

My father leans back in his chair, fingers steepled, watching me with those sharp eyes that miss nothing.

“You’ve been… distracted,” he states.

I don’t respond. He doesn’t expect me to.

“Your lack of focus is noticeable. By everyone. You mother has been worried.” A pause. “So have I.”

I clench my jaw. “I’m fine.”

He arches a brow, unimpressed. “You’ve said that before, and it wasn’t true then either.”

My father isn’t the yelling type, never has been. He and my mother have always been good to me, the best in fact, better than most would expect from a ruthless mafia leader.

He studies me for a moment, then nods slowly. “Alright. Take what you need. But don’t lie to yourself and pretend this will go away if you bury it deep enough.”

I still.

“I know what guilt looks like,” he adds. “Do not let it control you. Learn to let it go. You do not owe that girl anything.”

And that only reinforces my guilt. Because he actually thinks this guilt I feel is for Camilla. Maybe a tiny part of it is, but with everything else happening, she has actually slipped my mind as of late.

No, this guilt I have is for making out with the son of one of my fathers’ greatest enemies. For making out with *my* greatest enemy.

But I can’t ever tell him that.

“Thank you, dad. I appreciate it,” I tell him.

He stands and rests his hand on my shoulder briefly, warm, grounding, and leans down to press a chaise kiss to my hair. He’s always been fairly affectionate with me, but it has increased since he realised how much I’ve spiralled lately.

He walks out, leaving me alone in the silence.

And I sit here, heart pounding, wondering what he would think if he knew the truth.

-

My apartment is silent, save for the distant hum of the city outside and the soft tick of the clock on the wall. It’s not a peaceful silence. It lingers, like it’s waiting for something to break it.

I sit at my desk, staring at the laptop screen. The glow of it lights up the darkened room. I haven't bothered to turn on the ceiling lights. Just the desk lamp, casting soft shadows across old notebooks and unopened textbooks.

My fingers hover over the keyboard.

This feels stupid. Childish.

But I can't ignore it anymore, the weight in my chest, the constant buzz in my head, him.

Finally, I type it.

'How do I know if I'm gay?'

The moment I hit enter, I want to slam the lid shut. I feel exposed, even though I'm alone.

It feels dumb, too. I know I'm not gay, without a doubt. I was in a happy relationship with a woman for years and genuinely felt things for her. Romantically and physically. I've accepted I'm almost certainly not straight now, but I'm not gay either. But, still, with my newfound attraction to men, or specifically one man, I figure it is a good place to start.

The results come fast; articles, forums, quizzes. Too many opinions, too many voices, too much noise. I scroll past the junk and try to find something real.

I read about attraction, orientation, fluidity. I don't know what I expected. A checklist? A sign? Some absolute answer?

But I keep reading.

Demisexuality. Graysexuality. Asexuality.

I slow down.

People who don't feel attraction unless they have a deep emotional bond.

People who only experience it rarely.

People who never do at all.

It's like I've stepped into a language I should've learned years ago.

Of course, I know about sexuality. Nikolai is of course bisexual, Killian is something I'm not quite sure of, but it's certainly not straight, and that's okay. My uncles Maksim and Anton have been together since before I was born.

None of it fits perfectly. But something clicks. Something shifts. Like I've been holding my breath and didn't know it until now.

I think of Camilla. Of how, while it happened, it felt real. How my feelings for her are something I am sure of, no matter how the relationship ended. But, also, no matter how much I loved her, I could never force myself to be in love with her.

Then I think of Yulian.

Of that kiss.

Of the way everything inside me snapped and sparked, so sudden and overwhelming it nearly knocked the air out of me.

It wasn't just that it was him. It wasn't just that he was a guy. It was us. The history. The tension. The way his mouth moved against mine like he owned it and how, for a second, I let him. Wanted him to.

I run a hand over my face.

My parents wouldn't care if I'm not straight. They never have. My uncles are married. Nikolai openly dates men. They've never made it feel like a secret. Never made it feel wrong.

But our world? The mafia? That's different.

The old men with ancient names and power, they whisper about bloodlines, heirs, tradition. I'm the son of the pakhan. The future of our Bratva. I'm not supposed to be confused. I'm supposed to marry a woman of good standing and produce a legacy worth fearing.

An heir means a wife. An heir means children. An heir doesn't stumble over a fucking kiss.

I stare at the screen, heart hammering.

I don’t know what I am. Gay? Bi? Something else? I don’t know if I want to be labelled. I don’t know if I can be, not yet. But I know I can’t stop thinking about it.

And maybe I’m not ready to say it out loud, to anyone, but sitting here, alone in the dark, reading words I’ve never let myself read before?

That’s a start.

I swallow hard, closing one tab and opening another.

Reddit.

I don’t know what I’m looking for. I just type: “LGBTQ+ questioning help.”

And there it is. A whole world of strangers; open and raw in ways I don’t know how to be. Some are angry. Some are scared. Some are seventeen. Some are fifty. They’re asking the same things I am. ‘Is it okay if I didn’t know until now?’ ‘Can I be bi if I’ve never been with a guy?’ ‘Is it normal to only be attracted to someone emotionally first?’ ‘Am I broken?’

The questions dig into me like hooks. They sound like me. My cursor hovers over the "Sign Up" button. I don't let myself overthink it. I create an account and when it asks for a username, I type: QUIETRAGE.

It fits.

It feels stupidly dramatic. Like a comic book villain. But it's exactly what I am: all silence and tension, storm beneath the surface. No one really sees the fire. They just hear the calm voice, the control. I like that name more than I should.

I scroll deeper. Thread after thread. I see people spill everything; years of confusion, joy, guilt, self-acceptance. Some talk about being terrified of their families. Others talk about freedom. Some are like me, tied to tradition, to expectation, to a life already decided.

I don't post. I don't comment. But I do read, and I do listen.

I could speak here if I wanted. I could type something into the void and have someone reply. I have the option now. A way to say the things I can't even whisper aloud. I lean back in my chair and stare at the screen, my face lit up like I'm confessing to something holy.

I think of him.

Yulian, with that stupid smirk. The kiss that wasn't supposed to happen but did. The way he looked at me like he knew, like he wanted. The way my body reacted before my mind could catch up. The way I let it happen.

My breath stutters as the memory creeps in again. Hot skin. Teeth. Hands. Pressure. I felt like I was drowning and flying at the same time. And I liked it. I hated that I liked it. I want it again. I want to never feel it again.

Fuck.

I don’t know what I am. I don’t know what it means. I don’t know what comes next.

But sitting here, in the dark, in this quiet apartment with a username like a warning and a Reddit tab open to strangers-

I feel seen. A little less broken. A little more real.

And maybe I’m not ready to say it aloud. But at least I’ve started. But this time, it feels a little less heavy.

-

Yulian

-

Jeremy stumbles back with a grunt, his guard falling too slow. I don’t hesitate.

My fist connects clean with his jaw; sharp, brutal, final. He drops like dead weight, hitting the floor of the ring with a thud that echoes through the room.

I don’t wait for the applause or confirmation. I’m already sliding under the ropes, chest heaving, blood singing in my veins.

“Mikhail,” I bark the second my boots hit the ground, eyes locking onto him across the crowd. He’s already got his phone up, smirking like he knew I’d come storming over.

“Did you get it?”

He holds the screen toward me. “Crystal clear. Whole thing. You want it now?”

I exhale a breath I didn’t know I was holding. “Yeah. Send it right over.”

“Already on it,” he mutters. “You finally happy?”

I don’t answer. Not because I’m not, but because it’s not about happiness. It’s about precision. Control. Getting the exact result I want.

And this? This fight was the first one I’ve actually won in weeks.

The last two fights were a goddamn joke. Niko caught me off-guard with a cheap sweep and Jeremy, smug bastard, landed a lucky hit that knocked me down just long enough for it to count. No way in hell I could send those to Vaughn. What would be the point? I’m not going to hand him a video where I lose like some pathetic little puppy chasing his approval.

This one, though? This one he’ll watch.

And he will watch it. He always does. Even if he acts like he doesn't. Even if he's halfway across the world pretending to be normal.

Let him lie to himself. I know better. I know what we did.

God. That kiss. That kiss.

It's been weeks and I still can't stop thinking about it. About him. The way he looked at me, like he wanted to kill me, fuck me, scream at me and beg for me all at once. The way he grabbed me back. Hands in my shirt, lips on mine like he was starving.

He says he hates me.

Bullshit.

He craved it. Craved me. And for one moment, he let himself have it. I felt it, his walls cracking, the flood breaking. I heard the sound he made when our mouths slid together. No one makes a sound like that unless it's real.

He wanted me. He still wants me.

And then, sure, he pushed me away. Stormed off like he didn't just melt into my mouth. Like he hadn't been grinding against me a second before. Like he wasn't so close to giving in.

But I know the truth.

He’s scared.

Of me. Of himself. Of how badly he wants something he’s not supposed to want. Something that doesn't fit in the perfect little heir-to-the-throne mold his family gave him.

I can work with fear.

Fear’s just love in a mask, anyway.

I pocket my phone, already picturing the look on his face when he watches the footage. When he sees me on top again. Dangerous. Ruthless. The version of me he pretends he doesn’t miss.

I lick a little blood from my lip and laugh to myself.

I grin and roll my shoulders, the ache of the fight already fading into background noise. There’s something sharp and satisfying about knowing I still have that kind of pull. Even if he’s a thousand miles away. Even if he’s pretending none of it happened.

He can lie all he wants. But we both know I made him feel something. And it’s only a matter of time before he comes back for more.

Mikhail is still standing beside me, phone still in hand, eyebrows knitted like he’s trying to read me. His eyes flicker between me and the ring. I know he’s been watching me closely. The way I’ve been behaving. He knows something’s off and it’s more than just the fights. He knows there’s someone who’s gotten under my skin. He probably

knows who it is, too.

“You okay boss?” Mikhail’s voice is quiet, but I hear the worry, the hesitation. He doesn’t say Vaughn’s name, but it’s there. Vaughn, always Vaughn.

“I’m fine,” I spit, wiping my hands on my shirt. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

He doesn’t buy it. I can see it in his face. “You’ve been a little off lately, is all.”

“I’m fine. Just focus on the video, Mikhail. That’s all we need to worry about.”

He’s still looking at me, like he wants to dig deeper, but I cut him off before he can say anything else.

Without warning, I climb back into the ring, the crowd quieting down, all eyes on me. Jeremy and his group are gone now, likely to nurse his wounds. The whole damn place goes still, and I can feel it. The tension. The anticipation. Like they’re all waiting for me to lose my mind.

And maybe I am.

I look around, the people I’ve trained with, fought with, bled with, and I know I can’t let them see me crack.

“Hey!” I yell, voice cutting through the quiet, sharp like a whip. “I’m

throwing a party tonight! Everyone's invited! Big one. All of you. Who's up for it?"

The words hang in the air like a dare, like a challenge. I need it. Cheers echo loudly in agreement. I need the noise, the chaos, the drink, the music.

Mikhail's still standing at the edge of the ring, arms crossed, eyes narrowed. He's not buying it either. But I don't care. I don't care if he knows, or if anyone else does.

I'm doing this for me. To forget. To drown out the noise that keeps telling me Vaughn's not here. That I can't have him just yet.

And for just one night, I'm going to forget that, too.

-

The party is chaos, which is exactly what I need.

Lights strobe like a seizure. Bass pounds so heavy I can feel it in my teeth. The mansion is packed, bodies everywhere, music rattling the walls, heat thick in the air. Someone's making out on the stairs. Someone's breaking something in the kitchen. Perfect.

I'm stretched out on my favourite lounge chair like I own the world. Mikhail's posted beside me like a statue with murder in his eyes, watching everyone with that quiet disapproval he's so good at. The vodka burns sweetly down my throat, and everything feels just distant enough.

My eyes dart around for someone interesting. Most people here will happily placate me as much as they think I want. But I'm not in the mood for that.

Then my eye catches on her. Annie.

"Annie!" I shout cheekily, grabbing her attention. She has grown on me a lot lately, especially since helping me out at the initiation.

Dressed in deep red, slinky and smug. Hair loose, lips glossy, and that ever-present gleam in her eye that says she's smarter than you and probably knows your PIN number.

She weaves through the crowd like a queen cutting through peasants, and I don't miss the way heads turn. She stops in front of me with one brow raised and a smirk that could start a war.

"You're not dancing?" she yells over the music, leaning in close so her lips brush the shell of my ear.

I tilt my head toward her, grinning. "I don't need to dance when the room already revolves around me."

She rolls her eyes and leans in again, this time speaking just below my jaw, her breath warm. "Or maybe you're scared you'll get shown up."

I chuckle, leaning toward her so our foreheads nearly touch. "I only lose when I'm bored. And tonight? I'm not bored."

She snorts, eyes sparkling, and slips onto the arm of the couch beside me, legs crossing effortlessly.

“You’re lucky I’m too pretty to punch,” she says, glancing sideways.

“I’m lucky for a lot of things.” I sip my drink and tap her ankle with my foot. “Mostly that you keep showing up.”

“Don’t flatter yourself,” she murmurs, voice close to my cheek now. “I show up for the good liquor and the even better view.”

“Oh? Anyone in particular catch your eye?”

She leans in so close I feel her laugh vibrate against my throat. “Yeah. There’s this cocky Russian asshole who thinks he’s god’s gift to everyone.”

“I hear he’s a terrible kisser.”

“Probably,” she says with a wink, “but I bet he’s got stamina.”

I bark out a laugh, tossing my head back. She grins wider, clearly pleased with herself. We stay there for a beat, shoulder to shoulder, warm and tangled in the thick air and louder-than-hell music.

I glance at her again, and she’s scanning the crowd now. Her eyes land on someone tall across the room, tattoos, leather, danger radiating like

heat.

She leans back into me, lips ghosting my ear. “Think I’m gonna go find someone who can actually show me a good time.”

I give a dramatic gasp. “Betrayal. Right in front of my vodka.”

“You’ll live.” She stands with a stretch, smoothing down her dress. “Don’t get too clingy, Yulian.”

“Too late.”

She laughs, soft and low, and turns away. “Try not to miss me.”

I watch her disappear into the crowd, owning the floor with every step. Confident. Lethal. My eyes track her just long enough for her lips to lock with the man she was eyeing. At least one of us is going to have a pleasurable night.

Chapter End Notes

> hope you enjoyed. this chapter was more about just establishing how they are feeling about everything at this point and showing/ developing their relationships a little with people outside of each other. also ensuring it sticks to cannon by keeping in the parts that are mentioned in KTV, hence the research and reddit deep dive by vaughn.

Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

> hellooo. its been a few days, but i had work the last two hence not really getting anything done. however, i have today and tomorrrow off, so you can probabaly expect another tomorrow!
>
> this is a shorter chapter in comparison to some of my others, but i think the next will be pretty long. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Yulian

-

The basement feels a little less hostile today. The air is still heavy and stale, like it's been stuck down here longer than I've been alive, but the tension has eased, just a little. Vaughn doesn't turn away this time when I come down the stairs. He's still sitting in the corner, still tied up, still watching me like I might lunge at him. But he watches. That's new.

I've got a bag tucked under one arm and a flashlight in my other hand, guiding my steps as the overhead bulb continues its dramatic on-again, off-again flickering.

"Truce," I say as I reach the bottom. "I come bearing gifts."

He raises one eyebrow. "More food?"

"Yes, but other things too." I grin and set the bag down between us. "I brought a game."

He stares at me, wary. “What kind of game?”

I sit cross-legged on the rug and start pulling pieces from the box. “Snakes and Ladders.”

His expression cracks, just slightly. “Seriously?”

“What? It was the only thing I could find. It’ll be fun, anyway. Plus, it has snakes and ladders. That’s basically my whole personality.”

“Don't forget kidnapping.”

“Exactly,” I say cheerfully.

He doesn't smile, not really, but his posture loosens, and that's a win in my book.

“I’ll untie one of your hands,” I say, quieter now. “Just so you can play. No funny business.”

He watches me for a long moment, like he's weighing the risk. But then he nods once, sharp and subtle. I move over and crouch beside him. His wrist is chafed where the rope's rubbed too long. I make a mental note to loosen the other side later when he’s asleep.

The knot comes undone with a bit of effort. He rolls his hand once it’s free, flexing the fingers before settling down across from me on the rug, where

the board waits.

“You go first,” I say, handing him the dice.

“You sure? I thought you liked going first.”

“I like watching you lose more.”

He rolls his eyes and flicks the die across the board. “You’re insufferable.”

“And yet here you are,” I hum.

The game starts slow, just back-and-forth rolls, plastic tokens sliding along squares while we silently track our progress up the board. He munches on the snacks I brought him as we go. I climb a ladder almost immediately and grin when Vaughn groans.

“Already winning,” I say.

“It’s not skill-based.”

“Is that what losers tell themselves to sleep at night?”

He flicks the dice at me this time. It bounces off my knee and rolls to a five. He’s trying to hide the smile, but it’s creeping in. I can see it in the corners of his mouth.

“You’re so annoying,” he mutters.

“I know. It’s part of the charm.”

The game gets heated in that ridiculous way only Snakes and Ladders can. He lands on a long snake and glares at the board like it personally betrayed him. I land on one a minute later and accuse the dice of favouritism. He accuses me of cursing the board. I accuse him of rigging fate itself. He tells me I sound insane.

“Tell me something new,” I say, nudging his foot with mine. He kicks back. Lightly. No venom.

It feels weird, normal. Almost like we’re just two kids killing time on a rainy afternoon. If you forget the cement walls and the rope binding one of his arms and the whole… kidnapping situation.

He gets ahead. Then I catch up. Then he pulls in front again. He’s annoyingly smug when he wins the first round, even though it’s entirely down to luck.

“You’re going down in round two,” I warn him.

“You said that about the first game.”

“Yeah, well, now I’m motivated.”

We reset the board. As I move my token back to start, I glance up at him again. His face is more relaxed than it’s been since he got here. His eyes

are less guarded, mouth a little looser. He doesn't even notice me watching him.

I spot a faint scar near his hairline, the kind you'd miss if you weren't really looking. There's a faint freckle beneath his left eye, one I'm sure no one else has ever complimented. His lips press into a thin line when he's focusing, and I wonder if he does that when he's reading or thinking about something too hard.

He's prettier than most people realize, I think. Beautiful in a way that doesn't try to be. It's irritating.

"Stop staring," he says without looking up.

"Wasn't," I lie easily.

"Were."

"Was not."

"You're creepy."

"You're a sore winner."

He smirks, and I feel absurdly victorious. It's such a small expression. Barely there. But it feels like cracking a safe open with a paperclip.

We keep playing. He wins again. I accuse the board of conspiring with him.

He laughs this time, actually laughs, and throws a token at my forehead. It bounces off harmlessly and lands near my knee.

“You have terrible aim,” I say.

“I’ll have you know I have amazing aim, inherited from my mother.”

I consider asking about her, but I figure now isn’t the time, I’ll wait until a little more time has passed since the escape attempt.

We’re still bickering when the second game ends. He leans back against the wall, shifting stiffly. That one hand is still tied, and it’s starting to bother me more than it should.

“You tired?” I ask as I begin putting the pieces back into the box.

He shrugs one shoulder. “A little.”

“That was fun,” I say, watching him closely.

He hesitates. Then nods. “Yeah. It was.”

We don’t say anything else for a while. I finish packing up the game and set it aside. He shifts a little to get more comfortable in the corner. He doesn’t ask me to stay, but he also doesn’t look away when I linger near the edge of the rug, sitting close enough to be a presence.

Something is different between us now. The tension’s not gone, but it’s

shifted. Softened. Like maybe he's beginning to see I'm not the monster he thought I was. Or maybe I am, but he's choosing to ignore it; for now.

I'll take that.

"Night," I say finally.

He doesn't reply. Just nods. Slowly. Barely.

But it's enough.

-

Present Day

Vaughn

-

There's something sick about the way I've started keeping tabs on him. Obsession dressed up like strategy, as if putting a name to it makes it any less pathetic. But the truth is, I can't stop. Every time I try to focus on something else, my thoughts circle back to him, what he's doing, who he's with, what he's thinking. It's maddening.

But I can't stop.

Yulian's in my head like a parasite, burrowed in deep, wrapped around my spine. The more I try to shake him, the tighter he coils. Every breath I take feels like his. I've told myself it's about control. That if I know what he's up to, I'll be better equipped to plan my next

move. That knowing gives me an edge. But deep down, I think I just want to be close to him in whatever ways I can, even if it's only through the filtered lens of someone else's phone camera.

And I hate that I don’t hate it.

That’s where Jessie comes in.

Jessie’s the only one I trust with this. She’s not part of the usual circle, she's not one of the loud, brash boys I grew up with who think subtlety is for cowards, or one of the spoiled heirs to some half-baked empire with something to prove. Her family’s on the edge of our world, close enough that she understands the rules and consequences, but not so deeply tied that people would suspect anything if she got too curious. She's the kind of person who knows how to disappear into a room and come out with everything that happened inside of it.

She’s been good at keeping an eye on Yulian. Discreet. Efficient. Occasionally amused, but never judgmental. I get semi-regular updates, short texts, timestamped photos, the occasional video clip that I watch too many times before deleting.

She sends them without fanfare. No extra commentary, no teasing remarks. I think she understands this is something I need, even if I haven’t told her why.

He’s still fighting. Still winning. Still turning heads and making chaos.

I eat it all up.

Sometimes she includes short clips. Of him laughing, walking or lighting a cigarette with that fucking smirk on his face like he owns the whole island. I watch them more than I should. Sometimes on

loop. Just… watching.

It's messed up, I know that.

And yet.

Lately, I've been thinking about asking her something else. Something bigger. More personal.

Jessie's a lesbian. Open about it and honest in a way I envy. I keep wondering what she'd say if I asked her, about identity, about sexuality, about all the shit I've been spiralling in lately. Would she get it? Would she understand the grayness I'm stuck in?

The other Heathens are too close to everything. Too far on the inside.

Jessie's just enough outside.

Maybe I'll ask. Eventually.

My phone buzzes. Speak of the devil. I swipe the screen, and it's her.

Jessie: He's throwing a party tonight. Looked crowded. Loud. Figured you'd want these.

Three images load beneath the message.

The first photo is of the living room of that damn mansion lit in reds

and golds, packed with bodies, smoke, and light. The second is of Yulian, in all his lazy, regal arrogance, slouched on that massive leather couch like it's a throne. Drink in hand. Smirk in place. I stare at that one much longer than I should.

But the third. Oh, the third I simply can't drag my eyes from. It's that same girl I saw him around before, Annie.

Sitting on the armrest beside him, their faces inches apart, her lips at his ear, his smile crooked as she says something. They're close. Closer than they should be. Laughing. Whispering.

My stomach twists. I don't know what it is. Jealousy? Annoyance? Something acidic and ugly and hot under my skin.

It's just Annie. I know her. She's bold, flirty, smart. She doesn't fall for people easily, and Yulian- Yulian doesn't do genuine.

But still.

I zoom in without thinking. I study his expression. The way his hand rests on the back of the couch, not quite touching her. The lazy tilt of his body. His eyes, dark and sharp. Focused on her like she's saying something interesting.

I hate it.

I lock my phone, toss it onto the desk like it's burned me. For a moment, I just sit there, breathing too hard. I should stop this, should stop all of it.

But I won't. I can't.

-

I hate them.

The more updates I get, the more the weight settles in my chest like a stone I can't shake. It's not even the photos themselves, it's the constant reminder that Yulian is always surrounded by people. Loud ones. Loyal ones. Pretty ones. People who get to be near him while I sit here, across an ocean, watching everything through filtered snapshots and silent videos.

I close my laptop, but the image of him with Annie still lingers, her body angled toward him, lips brushing against his ear like she has every right to be that close. I don't think I've ever hated a grainy, low-res photo more. It makes me feel useless. Removed. Like I'm not even a factor in his life anymore.

I told myself that it was strategic. That staying away is smart, safer. That distance makes it easier to think, to plan.

But all I've done since I came back is think. Obsess. Rot.

Maybe it's time.

I leave my room and find my dad in his office, sitting behind the wide desk like a mountain that refuses to move. The second he sees me, he raises a brow, expectant, like he already knows something's coming.

“I’m thinking of transferring,” I say, cutting to the point.

He leans back slightly, arms folding. “To Kings U?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

He doesn’t speak. Just studies me. Waiting.

“I just… I don’t feel like I have a reason to stay here anymore,” I say. “Everyone’s over there. All my friends. Camilla’s gone. The mess is behind me.”

It sounds rehearsed. Too clean. Too… hollow. But it’s not all a lie. Just most of it.

“And you didn’t want to go at the start of the year,” he points out. “What’s changed?”

I pause. Too long.

“Guess I want a fresh start now,” I mutter. “After Camilla, I need something new. Somewhere new.”

He nods slowly, but I can tell he doesn’t buy it completely. “And this has nothing to do with Yulian?”

For a moment I freeze. How does he know? Panic runs through my veins at him so casually mentioning what has transpired between Yulian and I this past month. But then I think for a moment. I've already sworn to kill him, and this must be what my dad is referring to.

I stiffen, but force my face to stay neutral. "He's on the island. That hasn't changed."

My father studies me again, like he's trying to peer through my skull.

"You still want revenge, then?" he asks.

For a second, I hesitate.

Do I?

I haven't thought about revenge in weeks. Haven't felt it. Not really. Not since the kiss. Not since-

I clench my jaw.

"Of course I do," I say sharply. "Being close to him… it'll help. I can get inside his head. Make him regret every goddamn thing."

A lie. Maybe. Maybe not. I can't tell anymore.

My father hums, then stands slowly, walking around the desk to stand

in front of me. “I trust you, Vaughn. Whatever this is really about… I’ll support whatever you choose. You’re not a kid anymore. You know what you want.”

He claps a hand on my shoulder. “Besides, having someone reliable across the Atlantic wouldn’t hurt. There’s always business on that side. People we can’t trust. You? I trust.”

His words land heavy. Not because of the pressure, but because they’re sincere. He means it. I feel like I’m lying to him, making a mockery of him. He has no idea what’s happened between Yulian and I, what is still happening.

“Thanks,” I say quietly, then glance away. “I’ll look into it properly.”

He nods once. “Let me know what you decide.”

I leave before I start overthinking it.

Because deep down, I already know what I’ve decided.

-

It’s well past midnight, and the glow of my laptop screen is the only light in the room. I should be asleep, or at least trying, but instead, I’m hunched at my desk, elbows pressing into the wood, fingers idly scrolling through Reddit like it might hold the answer to a question I still haven’t figured out how to ask.

What started as casual curiosity has turned into something else entirely. I've been doing this more often; reading through posts about sexuality, labels, questions, confusion. Most of them don't apply to me, not exactly, but I find pieces that resonate. Enough to keep me coming back. Enough to make me think that maybe there is a name for the way I feel.

I stop when I see a post titled "I'm not gay, but I can't stop thinking about my superior – Help?"

I click it.

I read through the post, finding the writer and I share a lot of feelings and thoughts. It seems like we are going through the same thing right now.

His words settle in my chest like lead.

It isn't exactly my situation, but the echo is there. That aching sense of being dragged toward someone against your better judgment. Wanting something you're not supposed to want.

I reread a few lines, wondering if the guy who wrote this felt as obsessed as I do. If he woke up thinking about him. If the thoughts ever stopped. If the shame came in waves like it does for me.

The username is TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS (WHAT, I AM.). Guess he thinks pretty highly of himself.

I hesitate. My hand hovers over the keyboard for longer than I'd like to admit, but eventually, I move to the message icon and start typing

before I can overthink it.

I explain how I'm in a similar situation of my own, without giving any details.

I hit send before I can change my mind and immediately shut the laptop, as if that might erase what I just did.

It doesn't.

I sit back, exhaling through my nose, trying to ignore the heat rising in my chest. It's stupid, probably. Reaching out to a stranger, offering connection when I can't even be honest with the people who know me best. But somehow, the idea of talking to someone outside of my world, someone who won't see me differently, won't weaponize it, won't know, feels like the safest option I have.

Just as I start regretting it, my phone lights up with a notification from the Reddit app I've recently downloaded on there. He's already responded.

We end up messaging back and forth for a while, and it's nice to finally have someone to talk about all of this with. I explain some terms to him like asexuality, demisexuality and more, finally making good use of all my research. After a couple messages, though, he stops replying, and I

figure he must be doing something now.

I shut off my phone, hoping he gets back to me again. I enjoyed our conversation, and it would be nice to have someone to speak about everything regularly with, even if they don't have any connection with my world at all.

With nothing to do, my mind slips back to upsetting images.

I haven't been able to stop looking at the photos and my stomach twists every time I do.

How can he be like this? How can he flirt with me, send me videos, kiss me like he's starving, and then turn around and act like I'm just one of a hundred passing fascinations? Like he can drape his arm over anyone, and it means nothing?

I rake a hand through my hair. My jaw aches from how tightly I'm clenching it. I know I shouldn't care. I know how he is. He thrives on being watched. Being wanted. But still, he doesn't get to look at me the way he did and then carry on like it didn't happen. Like I'm just another name on his list.

He made me feel insane. Unhinged. Like I was the problem for wanting more than just a game.

The fury comes hot and fast, a flare I don't bother containing. I grab my phone off the desk, my thumb hovering over his contact. His name stares back at me like it's mocking me.

Yulian.

God, I should leave it. I should be above this.

But I'm not.

I open a new message, the words already burning on the tip of my tongue.

And then I start typing.

-

Yulian

-

My room's lit only by the red glow of the LED strip I taped haphazardly along the ceiling last semester. It gives everything this low, hellish haze that feels deeply appropriate. I'm sprawled on the bed, one leg dangling off the edge, phone resting on my chest as I scroll aimlessly.

I'm not thinking about Vaughn. Not really. Okay, maybe a little. Maybe more than a little.

I feel the first buzz of a text and lazily glance to the top of my phone. I actually think my brain short circuits when I see who it's from. It's the next buzz that seems to restart me and I hurry to click on his message.

Mishka:

Saw the photos. You really can't help yourself, huh?

I can't help the excitement that bubbles up inside of me. He's actually texting me. First.

Mishka:

Annie now? Seriously? You're pathetic. Can't keep it in your pants for five minutes.

I let out a low whistle and settle deeper into my pillows. God, I love when he's angry. He always pretends he's above jealousy, like he's some untouchable little prince, pure, composed, icy. But this? This is messy. This is real. This is delicious.

Yulian:

Aw. Miss me already, Mishka?

Mishka:

Don't call me that.

You're a fucking whore. Do you even remember kissing me? Or was I just another notch on your goddamn belt?

Well, fuck. That one does sting a little.

Do I remember the kiss? I live in the moment of that kiss. I dream in the language of that kiss. I breathe it. I use it like morphine for the ache in my chest.

Yulian:

I remember it in perfect HD, thanks. You practically melted into me. The memory of it is way better than porn, by the way.

Mishka:

You kissed me like you meant it. Then the second I leave, you're back to hanging all over everyone else.

He's spiralling. My grin widens.

Yulian:

You jealous, Mishka?

Mishka:

Of those pathetic people that hang off you? Don't flatter yourself.

I just think it's insulting. You flirt. You kiss. You pretend like it means something. And then I see you laughing with someone else two days later like I didn't even happen.

The hurt bleeds through the screen. He's angry, sure, but underneath? That wound is raw. Maybe I press my thumb right into it. Just a little.

Yulian:

You did happen. That's the problem. You crawled under my skin and now I can't peel you out without bleeding.

Too much? Maybe. But fuck it. He started this.

He doesn't reply for a minute. And then:

Mishka:

I don't want to talk in metaphors with you. I just want the truth.

Are you sleeping with Annie?

I snort out loud. Pretty sure that woman would cut my cock off before it got anywhere near her.

Yulian:

And what if I am? It wouldn't be your business, anyway.

Mishka:

It is my business.

Oh? Interesting.

Yulian:

And how is that? You left me in the woods like I was nothing. So forgive me if I didn't know I had to check in before sitting next to a girl on a fucking couch.

Silence again. He's stewing. I can feel it. Then again, so am I now. If he wants to stake some sort of claim on me, he can come here and do it himself. But he can't throw a tantrum after ditching me and flying halfway across the fucking planet.

Mishka:

I didn't leave you because you were nothing.

I left because I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I still don't.

I stare at that one for a long time.

I suppose I act like I do know what I'm doing. But I don't, really. I know what I want, sure. But the consequences of those wants? If I actually got them? I usually just ignore that part and just assume we can figure that out later. I know that he has a valid point in all his objections to us.

But I also know I want him to suffer for leaving me. Just a little.

Yulian:

Then don't act like you own me now. You don't get both. You don't get to kiss me and abandon me and then throw a jealous tantrum when someone else sits too close.

Mishka:

I'm not jealous.

Yulian:

Liar.

Mishka:

I'm not.

Yulian:

Say it.

Say you're jealous.

There's no response.

Yulian:

Come on, pretty boy. Just admit it. I promise I'll only screenshot it three times.

And then, finally-

Mishka:

Fine.

Yes. I'm jealous.

Happy?

I grin so wide it hurts.

Yulian:

Ecstatic.

And for the record?

I'm not seeing anyone else, including Annie. I'm not interested in anyone else.

Mishka:

You're not?

Yulian:

Nope. It's all for you, Mishka. Every goddamn bit of this chaos.

My chest is tight. I didn't mean to be this honest. But sometimes it just slips out. Truth, unfiltered, like blood from a fresh split lip.

Vaughn doesn't respond right away, and I don't mind. I stare at the screen, rereading everything, fingers twitching with the urge to say something else. Something soft. Something stupid.

But I don't. Not yet.

He knows. That's enough, for tonight.

-

It's late again, maybe one or two in the morning, and I'm halfway through reorganizing my closet because I couldn't sleep. I've got a vodka tonic on the dresser, a cigarette burning down in the ashtray I promised myself I wouldn't use indoors, and some bass-heavy Russian trap thudding from my speaker. The floor's a mess. Half my shirts are on the bed. There's no reason for any of this.

Except I'm waiting for him. Again.

And then, like I summoned him by sheer willpower and poor coping mechanisms, my phone buzzes.

Mishka:

Hey. You awake?

I grin like I just won a war. That's twice in one day. From him. I toss a pair of slacks across the room and grab my phone.

Yulian:

Twice in one day? Careful, angel. Keep this up and I'll start thinking you're obsessed.

Mishka:

Don't flatter yourself.

I just… had more to say.

Yulian:

Mhm. 'More to say.' That's what they all claim right before they fall in love with me.

Mishka:

God, you're insufferable.

Yulian:

And yet, you're still texting me. Strange.

Mishka:

Don’t make it weird.

Yulian:

Me? I’m being charming. You’re the one stalking my inbox like a boy with a crush.

He takes a second to respond. I can picture him now; probably pacing, or sitting up in bed, jaw clenched, phone screen too bright in the dark. Fighting off a smile he doesn’t want to admit exists.

Mishka:

You’re unbelievable.

Yulian:

Unbelievably hot? Yes. Go on.

Mishka:

Nope. We’re done here.

Yulian:

Wait, wait.

Don’t go. I was just about to send you a shirtless mirror selfie.

Mishka:

Stop.

Yulian:

Too flustered? Or too turned on? You can tell me. This is a safe space.

Mishka:

Yulian, I'm serious.

Oh. Okay. The air shifts. The teasing falters a little in my chest, caught somewhere between amusement and caution. I stop lounging and sit up straighter, phone resting more solidly in my hands.

Yulian:

Alright. I'm listening.

He doesn't type right away. When the bubble appears, it flickers in and out like he's editing himself. Like every word matters too much.

Mishka:

This thing between us… I don't know what it is. It's confusing. Complicated.

I'm still trying to figure myself out, and there's a lot going on.

But I know something is happening. I can't pretend it's not.

And I… I'd like to keep talking.

I don't know what I expected. Another barb, maybe. More posturing. But this?

This is real.

My chest tightens a little, in the way it only does when he's being honest. Vulnerable. And mine, even if he doesn't know it yet.

Yulian:

Vaughn, whatever's going on in that gorgeous, agonized brain of yours… it's yours. You don't owe me answers about who you are, or what you are. That's your journey. I'm not here to rush it.

I'll take whatever you're willing to give me. Whether that's late-night texts or grumpy glares or stolen moments in the woods again. You set the pace. I'll follow.

He doesn't respond right away. But the typing bubble shows up again, a gentle pulse. And when his message comes through, I feel the shift like a weight settling into place.

Mishka:

Thanks.

That means a lot.

Yulian:

I'm annoying as hell, sure. But I'm not going anywhere. You've got me.

However you want me.

Another pause. This time, it's quieter. Like he's not sure what else to say, but doesn't want to stop talking either.

Mishka:

I'd like to keep texting.

Regularly, I mean. I have no doubt that's something you want to.

Yulian:

How did you know? 😊

And that is certainly something I want too.

A quiet settles in. A good kind. Like the moment after a storm, where everything's damp and still and alive.

Mishka:

Goodnight, Yulian.

Yulian:

Sweet dreams, Mishka.

Try not to dream about me too much.

(Actually- do.)

Pretty sure with the time difference it's like the middle of the day for him, but oh well. The point is there.

There's no more replies. But I don't need one. The smile tugging at my lips isn't sharp or smug for once. It's just... soft. Almost gentle.

This isn't what I expected. But maybe that's what makes it matter.

Slow is fine. I can do slow.

Especially if it’s with him.

Chapter End Notes

thanks for reading :). hope you enjoyed.

when it came to writing their text conversations, i did initially try to emulate the way vaughn typed in kiss the villain, as he was one for abreviations, however i am pretty terrible when it comes to copying writing styles, so i pretty much just ended up doing it however i wanted. also, i am british, so everything is british spelling even though it probably makes more sense for them to type with american spellings but oh well.
there was definitely a lot more development in their relationship this chap so hope u enjoyed that.
thanks so much for all the comments u guys have sent, i always read them and am so greatful :).

Chapter Nine

Chapter Notes

guess who spent the last six hours since i posted the last chapter doing nothing but writing the next (its me). i havent done a single piece of coursework since half term started. ive gone to work and written this, thats it lol.
i usually dont actually post a chapter until the next is maybe a quarter done just in case i realise i need to change something in the last chapter to make continuity better so technically i didnt write this entire thing in one go, but its pretty close.
youll meet a new character this chap so i hope you like her ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

E

Eight Years Ago

Vaughn

-

The cold creeps in differently now.

It's not the biting kind that hits you all at once, it's slower, subtler. It sinks into the bones while you're sleeping or thinking or not paying enough attention, until eventually you realise your hands are shaking and your feet are numb and your jaw has been clenched for hours without you even noticing.

I'm not being hurt. Not physically, anyway. No one comes down here with fists or threats or anything like that. Not since I tried to escape. But that doesn't mean the cold, the loneliness, the hunger isn't killing me instead.

Because it is. Slowly. Quietly.

I'm still trying to be strong. I sit up straight when I hear footsteps. I don't cry. I don't scream. I keep my voice level. I pretend that this isn't the worst thing I've ever lived through.

But the truth is, the silence is getting to me. The hours stretch endlessly, and the dark feels like it's pressing in more and more each day. Time doesn't work properly down here. I don't know what hour it is when I wake up, or how long I've been alone, or how many days have passed without anyone speaking to me.

Except for him.

Yulian.

He's the only part of this life that doesn't feel like punishment. He comes down nearly every night now, sometimes with games, sometimes just to talk, always with food. And every time I see him, something in my chest loosens just a little.

He doesn't act like a captor. Not really. I know I should hate him for keeping me here, for stopping me from running when I had the chance. And maybe, part of me still does. But more and more, it's like I can't bring myself to care. Not when he's looking at me with those big eyes, or when he starts laughing so hard, he can't finish his sentences, or when he lets me win at games even though we both know I didn't really beat him.

He's good at distracting me. At making me forget, even if only for an hour or two, that I'm still locked in a basement halfway across the country from everything I know. That my parents might not even know if I'm alive. That my friends have no idea where I am. That I miss home so badly it hurts to think about it.

Yulian doesn't ask questions about my family, and I never bring it up. But I think about them all the time. My mom's voice in the morning when she wakes me up. My dad's rough laugh during movie nights. The stupid group chats with my cousins and the way we used to drive our parents mad. I'd give anything to go back to that, to warmth and noise and familiarity.

But when I let myself imagine home now, Yulian's there too.

I don't know when that started. Maybe it was gradual, something that snuck in between the way he jokes with me or how he always notices when I'm too quiet. But lately, I can't picture my old life without him in it. Not as the boy who kept me in the dark, but as someone else entirely, someone who makes the dark feel a little less unbearable.

I like being around him. Not just because he makes the time pass faster or because he brings me snacks and board games. I like him. I like the way his nose scrunches when he's trying not to laugh. I like the weird little facts he throws out when he's nervous. I like the way he looks at me like I'm the most interesting thing in the room, even though I'm probably not.

It doesn't make sense, and maybe it's stupid, maybe it's just the isolation talking. But when he's here, I feel human again. And when he leaves, everything feels colder, heavier, harder to bear.

I want to go home. God, I want it more than anything.

But I want him to come with me.

I keep thinking that his dad must be awful to him too. If he's capable of doing this to me, locking me away, tearing me from everything I know, then what must he be like to his own son? I've never heard yelling through the floorboards, never seen bruises or anything like that, but I can't exactly see beneath clothes. There's something in Yulian's eyes when he mentions his

father. A hesitation. A flicker of something too dark to name.

And it makes me want to protect him.

I want him to see what it's like to have a family who loves you for exactly who you are. Who would never raise a hand to you or throw you into a world you weren't ready for. I want him to sit at my kitchen table and bicker with my mom over how much food she's trying to serve him. I want him to hang out with me and my friends in the neighbourhood and laugh at all the stupid stories my cousins tell. I want him to know what it feels like to be safe.

To be wanted.

I don't know what this is between us. I don't know if I'm allowed to call it anything. But I know that if I ever make it out of here, I'm not walking away from him. Not unless I have to.

And if he wants to come with me, if I can get him away from that monster of a father, then maybe we both have a chance at something better.

Something real.

The stairs creak before I hear his voice.

"I come bearing gifts," Yulian announces, too dramatic for someone lugging a backpack that clearly just has one thing inside.

I sit up a little straighter, my heartbeat automatically picking up the

moment I hear him. I hate that it does that. I hate how I've started waiting for him without even realising. Watching the door. Counting footsteps. Hoping.

He pulls out a laptop like it's some priceless treasure and flops down beside me on the blanket that was brought to me by a guard a few nights ago. One for sleeping on and one as a cover. Its not enough, but it's better than what I had before. "Thought we'd switch it up from board games. Not that I don't love Snakes and Ladders, but I figured your brain might be craving something with a little more... fire."

I raise a brow. "Fire?"

He grins. "Fireboy and Watergirl."

It takes me a second to place it. That old two-player game I used to mess around with on the school computers when the teachers weren't paying attention. I look at the screen, and there it is; still laggy, still bright and ridiculous. Still kind of fun.

I smirk. "You just want to beat me at something again."

"I always beat you," he says, setting up the laptop down in front of us. "It's tradition at this point."

"Let me be the boy," I say immediately, before he can assign roles. "Since, you know, I am a boy."

He scoffs. "Are you forgetting that I am a boy too?"

“Well, I’m the one kidnapped and tied up in your dad’s basement,” I shoot back. “So, I feel like I should get first dibs.”

We bicker over it for longer than necessary, the kind of stupid, petty argument that somehow feels comforting, like the kind of thing normal kids do, not whatever we are. Eventually, Yulian throws his hands up.

“Fine. Be the damn boy. But if we die because of your arrogance, I’m making you switch.”

“You won’t have to. I’m naturally gifted.”

He mutters something under his breath that sounds suspiciously like ‘naturally irritating’ and passes me the laptop. We huddle close, our shoulders brushing as the game begins.

It’s simple, run, jump, solve the puzzle, get to the door. We’re awful at first, both of us mistiming jumps and yelling at each other for standing on the wrong buttons or falling into goo. But after a few rounds, we find a rhythm. I move when he tells me to. He waits when I lag behind. It’s… fun.

And it feels like something real. Something normal.

I glance at him from the corner of my eye, just for a moment. His face is tilted toward the screen, eyes focused, lips pressed together as he tries to make a jump. His tongue pokes out in concentration. His hair’s falling into his eyes, and he keeps blowing it out of the way, refusing to pause the game long enough to fix it.

I should hate him.

I want to hate him.

I want to look at him and remember the panic of waking up in a strange place, the cold of this room, the way my stomach twists every time I remember I'm not home. I want to remember how he called for his father when I tried to escape. How he's part of why I'm still stuck here.

But when I look at him, I don't see any of that.

I see the boy who brings me snacks even when he doesn't have to. Who always comes back, no matter how long his day has been. Who lets me win games sometimes just to see me smile. Who sits beside me like I'm not a prisoner, like I'm someone worth being near.

And I know I shouldn't forgive him.

But I think I already have.

Because whatever this is between us, this weird, fragile thread, we've built it ourselves. Not out of apologies or explanations, but out of stolen hours and stupid arguments and shared laughter in the dark.

And maybe that's enough. For now.

-

Present Day

Yulian

-

We talk every day now.

It started with the occasional message, but that didn't last long. Within a few days, it turned into full conversations, and now it's constant. Morning to night. Sometimes even in the middle of the night. I'll wake up to a notification and find a half-asleep Vaughn sending me a blurry photo of whatever book he's pretending to read or complaining about how early his lectures are. I send back something equally pointless, like a picture of my breakfast or a TikTok meme I know will make him roll his eyes.

It's the kind of back-and-forth that's easy. Effortless. We haven't talked about anything serious, no mafia, no childhood trauma, no who-we-are-or-what-we-are bullshit. But I don't mind. I'm not waiting for some deep revelation or emotionally raw conversation. I like what we have right now. It's light and fast and full of sarcasm, and honestly, it's the most fun I've had in a long time.

Vaughn's surprisingly funny when he lets himself be. Dry and brutal, like he's allergic to softness, but it's there. Hidden between the lines. Sometimes he says something that makes me laugh out loud, like, actual noise, and I want to tell him, but I never do. I just send back some smug reply and imagine the twitch of his mouth when he reads it.

We argue over stupid shit constantly. Which pizza toppings are valid. Whether cats or dogs are superior. If I should be arrested for how I organize my folders. And he gives as good as he gets, which only makes me want to keep going. I think we both get a kick out of trying to piss each other off in increasingly creative ways. It's borderline flirtation half the time, but neither of us says it out loud.

And that's fine. I'm not in a rush.

There's something… grounding about this version of him. The unfiltered, tired, hungry, mildly irritated version who messages me about the guy in his class who chews too loudly, or the lecture that bored him to death. He's more real like this. More reachable. Not the ice prince with the reputation or the mafia heir or the boy in the woods. Just Vaughn.

Sometimes I catch myself rereading our conversations. Not because I'm overthinking them or trying to dissect every word, just because I like the rhythm of it. The way we bounce off each other. The strange comfort that comes from knowing he's still there. Still talking. Still choosing to talk to me.

And maybe that's what matters most. That he's choosing this. Choosing me. No one's forcing him. I didn't manipulate or push or corner him into opening this door. He did it on his own. That means something.

So yeah, we're not talking about the past. We're not unpacking our trauma or defining whatever the hell is happening between us. But that's okay. We're building something, even if it's slow and messy and made up of bad jokes and blurry photos and late-night rambling.

My phone rings and for a moment, excitement builds inside me, only to plummet to the depths of hell when I actually see who the caller is.

I stare at it for a second too long, thumb hovering just above the green button. I could let it ring out. Let it buzz against my palm until it dies a quiet death and disappears from my screen like it was never there. But I already know that ignoring him only makes things worse later.

So, I answer.

“Yulian.”

That voice. Sharp. Cold. Clipped like it’s carved from ice. He says my name like it’s a command.

“Father,” I reply, voice flat, eyes narrowing on the wall across from me. I suddenly feel too big for my room and too small for my own skin all at once.

“I assume you’re still on that island, wasting time?”

I don’t rise to it. I’ve stopped wasting energy on the bait he tosses my way. “I’m at university. I told you, it’s important for me to learn the law if I want to break it properly.”

I don’t mention how it also means I get to be away from him.

“Mm. I expect you in Chicago by the end of the week.”

My spine stiffens. “I can’t. I’ve got coursework due. Exams coming up. Group projects. I’m not just sitting around, if that’s what you’re implying.”

“I wasn’t implying anything,” he says, which is his way of saying I was absolutely implying something. “I’m telling you to get on a plane. You can bring your homework if it makes you feel better.”

He says *homework* with such disdain that I grit my teeth. He always does this, tells, never asks. Decides and expects the rest of us to fall in line. I remind myself to keep my voice even, calm. “Is this about anything specific, or are you just feeling paternal all of a sudden?”

There’s a pause on the other end. Then, dryly, “Don’t flatter yourself.”

I feel that one like a blow. I don’t let it show.

“There are matters I want you briefed on. Things I’d prefer to discuss in person. And with the way tensions are rising lately, it would be unwise for you to travel alone.” Another beat. “Bring Mikhail.”

Of course. Bring Mikhail. Because enemies could be lurking around any corner, and God forbid anything happens to his precious heir before he’s ready to be trotted out like a weapon. I would have brought him anyway, seen as he is my best friend. But now my father has told me to, I don’t even want to.

I close my eyes, pinching the bridge of my nose. “I’ve managed perfectly well on my own so far.”

“Don’t argue,” he snaps. “I won’t repeat myself.”

My jaw locks. He never does. There are no second chances with him. Only expectations, and the quiet threat that failure brings consequences. Always has.

“…Fine,” I say after a moment. My voice is quiet, tight. “I’ll come.”

“Good.” He hangs up without another word.

I lower the phone from my ear and stare at the blank screen. My reflection in the black glass looks hollow. Faintly distorted. Like it’s not quite me.

I should be used to this by now. The way my chest feels like it’s been cracked open every time he calls. The way my hands curl into fists without me noticing. The way a single conversation can make the air feel heavier in my lungs.

I toss the phone onto the bed and drag a hand through my hair, already dreading the flight. Dreading the house. Dreading him.

A knock on my door breaks the silence. At least someone around here has good timing.

“Come in,” I call.

Mikhail peeks in, already wearing that look that says *you’re in trouble again, aren’t you?* “Everything alright?”

I shrug. “We’re going to Chicago.”

His expression doesn’t change, like he was expecting this. “When?”

“We will fly out tomorrow.” I pause. “He said to bring you.”

“Of course he did.” Mikhail steps fully into the room, eyes narrowing slightly. “What’s it about?”

“No clue. He just said there are things he wants to discuss. Which probably means things he wants to order me to do.”

Mikhail watches me for a long moment, like he’s trying to read between the lines.

“You want me to sort the jet out?” he finally asks.

“Yeah.” I force a breath out, trying to shake the knot tightening in my chest. “Have it ready for first thing tomorrow. I want to get this trip over with as soon as possible.”

Mikhail nods once and disappears back down the hall.

The moment he shuts my door; I pull out my phone again. This time, I dial the number without hesitation.

It rings three times before I hear the click, followed by her voice, bright and familiar in a way that softens the edges of my day just a little.

“Yulian?”

“Hey, Tati.”

Tatiana, or Tati for short, is my baby sister (well, seventeen, but still) and one of my favourite people in the whole world. Unfortunately, as much as I love her, I don't get to see her often as I hate being at home.

There's a small pause, and then a sharp gasp followed by an excited squeal. "You called me! You never call me. Are you dying? Tell me you're not dying. Because if you are, I swear to God, I will kill you myself."

I huff out a laugh and drop onto my bed, letting the tension ease from my spine, just a bit. "Relax. I'm not dying. I just… figured I'd give you a heads-up."

"A heads-up?" she repeats, suddenly suspicious. "About what?"

"I'm coming home."

There's a beat of stunned silence. Then, "Wait- What? When?"

"Tomorrow."

Her excited gasp makes me wince but also smile.

"Oh my God, you're coming home?! Like actually in the flesh? Not just sending a drone version of yourself to glare at me from a safe distance?"

“Yes, in the flesh,” I say, shaking my head, lips twitching. “Don’t make it weird.”

“It’s always weird. I’ve missed you,” she adds, more quietly this time.

I don’t respond right away. Just listen to the soft exhale that follows her words, feel them settle into something small and warm in my chest.

“I’ve missed you too,” I admit. “Even if you’re a pain.”

“That’s a given,” she says proudly. “Are you coming alone or brining anyone?”

“I’m bringing Mikhail, of course. You think I’m showing up there defenceless?”

“Okay, okay,” she says with a chuckle. “I’ll tell the cook to make the weird biscuits you like.”

“They’re not weird.”

“They’re shaped like tiny bears, Yulian.”

“They taste good.”

She laughs again, and for a second everything feels normal. Like we’re just brother and sister on a regular phone call, talking about snacks

and homecomings and dumb inside jokes. It's the kind of normal I don't get very often. Which is probably why I notice the shift the moment it happens.

Her tone shifts, just slightly. She goes a little too casual, a little too innocent. It's the verbal equivalent of someone inching toward a tripwire while pretending they're just out for a stroll.

"So," she starts, "while you're home…"

I close my eyes, already knowing where this is going. "Tati."

"What?" she says too quickly. "I haven't even said anything yet!"

"Yeah, and I already don't trust you."

She lets out a dramatic sigh. "Okay, fine. I was going to wait until we were eating bear biscuits and bonding, but since you're being so suspicious… just, just hear me out, okay?"

I stay silent. Which, from experience, she takes as permission to continue.

"I want to come back with you."

"To the island?"

"Yes! Look, I've been stuck here for my entire life, and it's driving me

insane. You know how miserable it is being cooped up with tutors and guards and no friends? I've done everything they've asked. I've played nice. I've smiled for the endless charity photos and made polite conversation with all of Father's terrible friends. But I hate it here. I feel like I'm not even living."

I rub a hand over my face, eyes drifting to the ceiling. "Tati-"

"I know what you're going to say but just listen. I was initially thinking of going after Christmas when your next semester starts, but with you coming home now and all… Well, I'm homeschooled anyway, right? So, it's not like it'll disrupt anything. And I wouldn't even be asking if I hadn't already begged Father, and of course he said no, because God forbid I have a life of my own. But if you ask, if you say something, he might listen."

"I'm not a miracle worker."

"No, but you're his favourite. And more importantly, you're the heir. He listens to you in a way he doesn't listen to me."

"That doesn't mean I can convince him."

"I don't need a guarantee, Yulian. Just try. Please."

Her voice cracks on the last word, and it guts me a little. I don't hear her beg often. Tati's the kind of girl who would rather explode than admit to needing something. But she's seventeen and smart and stifled, and I know what that house does to a person. I know what it did to me.

“…I’ll talk to him,” I say quietly. “I’m not promising anything. But I’ll try.”

There's silence on the other end for a second; then a shaky exhale.

“Thank you,” she whispers. “Really.”

I don’t say anything back. I just listen to the softness in her voice and the quiet relief that follows, and I pretend, for just a second, that trying will be enough.

That maybe this time, he’ll actually listen.

-

By the time I finally lie down, the room is dark except for the dull blue glow of my phone screen. I’ve spent the entire day knee-deep in suitcases and last-minute arrangements, answering Mikhail’s endless logistical questions and dodging my own frustration at how quickly everything got pulled out from under me.

Now, stretched out across my bed, I unlock my phone and scroll past the usual nonsense, group chats I’ve muted, two missed calls from some poor fool who still thinks I owe them a favour, and then-

Mishka

Two messages, sent hours ago, both carrying that dry bite he’s perfected.

Mishka:

Did you die or just get kidnapped again? Should I alert the authorities? Or at least my friends? I'm sure they'll celebrate your demise.

And then, a follow-up:

Mishka:

You're usually more annoying than this. It's unsettling.

A smile tugs at my lips. I settle deeper into the pillows and tap out a reply.

Yulian:

Spent the day packing. Not dead, not missing. Just boring for once.

It takes seconds before the typing bubble appears.

Mishka:

Define 'boring.'

Yulian:

Trip back to the States. Chicago.

Another quick response:

Mishka:

Voluntarily?

Not exactly.

There's a short silence, long enough for me to picture the hesitation behind the screen. He knows better than to ask questions. He knows I'm referencing my father, but he is definitely one of those 'off-topic' things we have silently agreed not to discuss. After all, I'm about to go see the man who kidnapped and practically tortured Vaughn when he was a child.

Eventually:

Mishka:

That sucks.

Simple. Direct. No pity.

I appreciate it. He could have said much worse, considering.

There's a short lull. I watch the screen for a moment, thumb hovering, debating whether to send my next text or not. It'll be sarcastic, not meant genuinely in anyway as it'll be practically impossible, but it could still push some boundaries.

Screw it.

Yulian:

Should I swing by New York on the way?

The typing bubble appears instantly, vanishes, appears again. I smirk.

Mishka:

What, to say hi?

Yulian:

Obviously. I'll bring flowers. Maybe a knife.

Mishka:

Romantic.

Yulian:

You know me. All heart.

He doesn't answer right away this time. I can imagine him now, sitting in some dramatically lit room, jaw tight, eyes narrowed, trying not to smile like an idiot.

I add:

Yulian:

I could always smuggle you out of the country mid-flight. You can disguise yourself as a very attractive flight attendant.

Mishka:

Tempting. But I doubt you'd make it through security with that attitude.

Yulian:

You underestimate my charm.

Mishka:

I think you overestimate your usefulness.

Yulian:

Rude.

I laugh softly, thumb still moving.

Yulian:

It would be worth it, though, to see your pretty face in person.

Mishka:

You’re so full of it.

Yulian:

Only for you.

Another pause. Longer this time.

Mishka:

You're ridiculous.

Yulian:

Takes one to know one.

I lean my head back against the wall, watching the cursor blink. The flirty edge is still there, light and easy, like it always is now between us. But underneath it, something steady. Familiar. We're not saying much of anything, and yet, it's everything.

Yulian:

I'll text you when I land.

Mishka:

You better.

Yulian:

Miss me already?

Mishka:

Don't flatter yourself.

Yulian:

Too late.

He doesn't respond after that, not right away, but I don't need him to. I close my phone, still smiling.

Yeah, it's not serious. It's not even possible. But hell, if I'm going to be dragged back to Chicago, at least I get to carry this with me.

And right now, that's enough.

-

Vaughn

-

I never thought I'd say this, but I've genuinely been enjoying texting Vaughn.

Like, really enjoying it.

More than I should.

What started out as a little spark of amusement, just poking at him until he cracked, watching his composure unravel one perfectly-typed message at a time, has turned into this weirdly addictive routine. He texts when he wakes up, I answer between classes, we fall into threads that last all day: movies, music, petty complaints about professors, the miserable British weather he constantly complains about. Sometimes the things he says are so dry and biting I actually laugh out loud, which earns me looks from strangers, but I don't even care.

It’s easy. Comfortable in a way I didn’t expect.

And despite everything, despite our past, despite the baggage, despite the lines we’re still pretending not to cross, I look forward to hearing from him. Every single day.

I guess I’d be lying if I said it hasn’t affected the way I’m thinking about everything else.

Like where I want to be. What I want to do. Who I want to be near.

The thought had been simmering for a while, half-formed, lingering at the back of my mind every time I saw a new notification from him. But this week, for once in my life, I actually did something decisive.

I submitted my transfer request.

After Christmas, if all goes smoothly, I’ll be attending the same university as him.

I’ll be on the same island as him, living not far away at all. We aren’t on the same course, as he is in law and I’m in business, but I wouldn’t be surprised if I bump into him a few times. Hell, I’ll probably make sure I bump into him all the time.

It’s not official, not permanent. I made sure to keep it flexible. If I change my mind, or something shifts, I can pull back, say it was temporary, blame logistics. But deep down, I know what I want. I’ve known for a while. I just didn’t think I’d let myself chase it.

Now that I have… I don't know.

It feels good.

Hopeful, even.

Which is terrifying. But here I am.

Somehow, between flirtatious texts and late-night conversations about obscure films and mutual hatred for certain people we pretend to tolerate, Yulian Dimitriev is well and truly working his way under my skin all over again.

And this time, I'm not sure I want to stop him.

I'm grinning happily to myself, thinking about what it'll be like after Christmas, when a message pops up on my phone from Gareth, of all people.

Gareth:

V, miss me?

Vaughn:

Only if you missed me, G.

As much as I consider him a close friend, we don't exactly privately

message all that often. We converse on group chats and calls, sure, but we rarely have a reason to direct message one another.

Gareth:

Of course I did.

Well, if that isn't suspicious, I don't know what it. We aren't exactly ones to tell the other how much we miss each other.

Vaughn:

Something tells me you're going to manipulate me now.

Gareth:

Aw, you have that little faith in me?

Vaughn:

Sometimes. Let's hear it.

Gareth:

I'm only texting to see how you're doing with your girlfriend.

He knows damn well she isn't my girlfriend anymore. However, I don't know if he knows she is dead. I still haven't told any of them myself, though Jeremy did call me to tell me he found out from his father, though he wouldn't tell any of the other Heathens without my permission.

It's not that I don't want them to know, especially at this point, where I do feel like I'm mostly moved on, I just don't want their pity.

Vaughn:

Ex-girlfriend.

Gareth:

Wow. She really cheated with Yulian? That sucks, man.

Vaughn:

I had my revenge :)

I haven't. Not really. And at this point, I doubt I ever will. Camilla is dead and Yulian is… well, he's Yulian. But I don't want Gareth or anyone to get in anyway suspicious of why I haven't necessarily taken my total revenge against him.

Gareth:

Do you believe the initiation night was enough?

The initiation night? How the fuck does he know about that. I didn't think anyone even knew Yulian was there. I mean, I suppose we did fight in the middle of the woods, but I was sure no one was around.

Shit, what if he knows about what happened afterwards, after we left the initiation.

Okay, I need to calm down. If he had seen me and Yulian doing

anything less than attempting to murder each other, he would have surely said something by now.

Vaughn:

For now.

Going on the idea that he doesn't know about that night other than our fight, I don't want him to think I'm still actively going after Yulian, in case he tries to do something himself. Only I'm allowed to do anything to Yulian. Even my closest friends aren't exempt from what I'll do if they hurt him.

Woah. Where the fuck did that come from?

Gareth:

I think you could do better than that, V. Not sure it affected Yulian that much tbh. He's such a fuckboy who's always flirting around.

What…

My mouth drops open as he sends a photo of Yulian with his arm wrapped around the shoulder of a man whose face is hidden. Yulian laughs happily in the photo, and I feel rage boil inside of me.

I don't even hesitate with my reply.

Vaughn:

Who's the other man?

The anger rising in me seems to match that which overtook me when I found out about Camilla. Which is insane, considering I planned to marry her but wanted to kill Yulian only a few weeks ago.

Gareth:

A professor you don't need to worry about. Yulian does that with everyone.

Vaughn:

Everyone?

He swore to me that he wasn't interested in anyone but me. What a fucking liar.

Gareth:

Uh-huh. Can't keep it in his pants and goes for anyone. Heard he's openly bi, like Niko, and equally adventurous.

A different emotion rises inside of me at that. One I'm very confused by.

Vaughn:

Openly? Does the motherfucker know what type of mafia he's set to fucking inherit?

Is he mad? I don't know his father well past what his fists feel like pounding on my flesh, especially since my parents have kept me away from his side of the mafia since the kidnapping, but I have no doubt

the man would not be happy with his only son and heir being with men.

Gareth:

Maybe he thinks it's okay because Niko is doing it.

That's ridiculous.

Vaughn:

Niko isn't the son of the leader. He can get away with it, but even he has to watch himself in front of older family members.

Even Niko will have to fight tooth and nail if he does end up with a man, though we will all fight for him if he does. Plus, Aunt Rai is a scary woman and would kill before allowing anyone to insult her son because of who he loves.

But he isn't the leader. I will be. And as leaders it is our responsibility to produce heirs and set an example. No one would ever take us seriously if we were dating a man. Even if that man were each other.

Gareth:

Idk, really. Maybe it's just rumours floating around.

Vaughn:

Of what sort?

Gareth:

All sorts. I can collect info if you like.

I so know Gareth is manipulating me right now. But I can't find it in myself to care. Not only Yulian screwing with other people after promising me he wouldn't, but he's also putting himself in danger at the same time.

Vaughn:

I'll owe you one.

Gareth:

You got it.

Niko wants you to come help him raid the serpent's mansion and beat Yulian to a pulp.

Vaughn:

I'll arrange something.

I put my phone down for a moment and a plan begins to form in my head.

Niko doesn't know Yulian isn't in the UK right now. Doesn't know about the texts, the late-night conversations, the things I haven't told anyone. Doesn't know that the idea of beating Yulian to a pulp, something I once fantasized about, isn't nearly as satisfying now that I've seen the look he gets when he talks to me like I'm something sacred.

Still, something twists in my chest. Maybe this is exactly what I need.

A wake-up call. A way to remind myself who I'm supposed to be.

But then another thought creeps in, darker. More calculating.

Niko already has a plan about what to do with Yulian. Who am I to get in his way? It'll need a few tweaks, sure, but I know just the idea to make it even more painful.

The plan begins to develop in my head, cold, precise. I sit back down, pick up my phone, and open our chat.

My fingers hover for a moment before I start typing, keeping my tone breezy, casual.

Vaughn:

Hey. You doing okay over there?

He replies almost instantly, because of course he does.

Yulian:

Unfortunately. We land in about twenty minutes. Save me.

Vaughn:

When are you heading back?

Yulian:

Not entirely sure yet, probably a few days. Why? Miss my constant attention already? 😏

My face doesn't even twitch.

Vaughn:

Actually, yeah. I was thinking… maybe you should swing by New York on your way back. Stay a couple nights. I know a place we can go so nobody will know.

There's a beat of silence. Then:

Yulian:

Wait. You're serious?

Vaughn:

Dead serious.

Another pause, longer this time. Then the three dots appear and vanish a few times before finally settling.

Yulian:

Damn, Mishka, that's unexpected. But hell yeah. I'd love to.

And just like that, it's done.

He has no idea what he's walking into.

I stare at the screen, at the tiny heart he's added after his message, and my stomach twists again. I hate how easy it would be to believe that heart means something. That any of this does.

But it doesn't. Not anymore.

He lied to me. Betrayed me. Again.

How could I be so stupid? I fall for his pathetic tricks over and over and over and somehow forgive him every time. I've had enough.

And now I get to betray him back.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed as always.
part of the reason i actually wanted to get this chapter done so much is cause i said i would post a chapter tomorrow but im not sure ill actually have time because f1 is on and then i definitely wont be able to on sunday because i have work then f1. you might still get a chap tomorrow, but im not 100% sure.
the next chapter is entirely yulians pov (and no vaughn, im sorry) but you will learn A LOT about his backstory, his family and who he is etc. so i hope your excited for some yulian lore!
thanks for reading!

Chapter Ten

Chapter Notes

ummm... hi.

yeh so its been a little while. super sorry about that, i have been pretty busy. the first two weeks of my easter break were like so productive writing wise but then i found out i actually had an important piece of coursework due on monday that i hadnt started. so, i was like im not writing anything else until i get it finished because obvs uni work is important and i didnt trust myself to do it if i let myself keep writing. anyway, i finished it yesterday and spent all day yesterday and today writing and this chap is now done!

as for future updates, i dont have great news. i have another piece of coursework (3k essay) due in a little over two weeks that i now have to focus on. ill try to write this fic alongside it but i wouldnt be super hoepful. after that, i have exams all through end of may to mid june that i need to focus on. so, updates will be rare between now and mid june unfortunately. but my degree does come first obviouosly. after that, however, i go into the summer holidys and updates will be extremely frequent as i will literally have nothing to do other than work.

so, again, sorry about taking so long, but i hope the wait is worth it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Yulian

-

The basement's cold in that way that seeps through the carpet and up into your bones, but I don't really mind. We've set up a pathetic little nest of cushions and old blankets around us, as we have taken to doing every night now. I stole a bunch of stuff from around the house and we hide them

behind the boxes before I leave and get them back out when I come down every night.

I even untie him now, sure that he isn't going to attempt to escape or hurt me. There would be no point, even if he did get out the house, the entire property is surrounded guards that would catch him.

Vaughn sits cross-legged opposite me, serious as ever, while I dramatically roll the dice like my life depends on it.

"Six. Again." I flash him a wicked grin. "That's three sixes in a row. I think the universe wants me to win."

"You're cheating."

"Oh, definitely. I replaced the dice when you blinked."

He raises an eyebrow, unimpressed. "Did you actually?"

"Wouldn't you like to know."

He mutters something about me being insufferable and makes his move anyway. I'm not even sure what game we're playing anymore, we've bent the rules so many times that it's become something new, some Frankenstein's monster stitched from pieces of Monopoly, Risk, and outright chaos. Vaughn's trying to strategize, and I'm trying to set things on fire metaphorically, which feels like a pretty accurate reflection of our personalities.

We bicker back and forth over the fake money and accuse each other of war crimes over game pieces, but it's not angry. It never is with him. I poke, and he rolls his eyes. He pokes back, quieter, like a whisper with teeth.

Eventually, we're sprawled out on the floor, arms folded behind our heads, eyes fixed on the ceiling like it's got answers. There's nothing up there but cobwebs and maybe some splatters of blood, but I pretend it's a night sky anyway.

"Do you ever do this outside?" I ask, voice lazy.

"Lie on the floor?"

"No, look up. At the stars."

Vaughn shifts a little beside me. "Sometimes. With my cousins and friends. Not very often though."

"I do it a lot," I say. "My dad said my mum's up there. In the stars."

He's quiet, but I keep talking, because if I stop, I'll think too hard about it and thinking about it makes my throat ache in that horrible way.

"So when I look at them, I feel like I'm looking at her. Like maybe she's looking back. Watching."

Vaughn turns his head toward me, just a bit. I can feel him looking, even if I don't meet his eyes.

“Do you remember when I asked you if you thought the stars look down at us the way we look up at them?”

“Yeah,” he says, slow. “I remember.”

“You told me it was a stupid question.” I let out a dry laugh, more air than sound. “It’s not, though. I asked because… sometimes I wonder if she’s watching me. Like I watch her.”

There’s a beat. Then another.

“I was wrong,” Vaughn says quietly. “It wasn’t a stupid question.”

I finally look at him. His face is a little shadowed, and his expression is too grown-up for a kid his age, all soft regret and something like guilt.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “About your mum. And for saying that back then. I didn’t mean it.”

“It’s okay. You didn’t know.”

He turns his gaze back to the ceiling. “I think… wherever she is, if she’s anything like mine, she’s watching you. Because she’s your mum. That’s what mums do. They’re always watching out for us. Even if they aren’t here physically.”

There’s something about the way he says it, so certain, like it’s a universal

law. Like there are no maybes in his world when it comes to this. I hold onto that certainty like a life raft.

“Do you think she’d be proud of me?”

Vaughn doesn’t hesitate. “Yes. Of course. You’re… you’re you.”

That shouldn’t be enough, but it is.

I blink hard, feel the tightness in my chest start to ease. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me,” he says quickly, and I catch the faintest flush creeping up his neck. “Just… don’t be weird about it.”

“I’m always weird about it,” I grin, bumping his shoulder lightly with mine. “You should be used to that by now.”

“I regret everything.”

“Too late. You’re stuck with me forever.”

He sighs dramatically but doesn’t move away.

He doesn’t mention how literally he is stuck with me, what with being kidnapped and locked in a basement and all. But, the vibes are good right now. Our soft breathing fills the room as we gaze upwards, not saying anything.

-

Present Day

Yulian

-

The plane touches down with a dull thud that vibrates through the cabin and settles like a stone in my chest. Chicago sprawls out beneath the grey sky, all steel bones and frozen breath, and though I'm technically home, it doesn't feel like it. It never really does.

I press my forehead to the window for a second, watching the airport workers bustle around on the tarmac like tiny, frantic insects. Everything here feels louder, heavier, colder. Like even the air has teeth.

I'm not looking forward to seeing my father. I never do. But the thought that gets me moving, gets me up and out of my seat, is that once this is over, once the requisite dinners and conversations and empty smiles are out of the way, I'll be free to do what I'm actually excited for.

Seeing him.

It's ridiculous, maybe. Impulsive, reckless, dangerous. But the second Vaughn said he wanted to see me, really see me, I knew I'd find a way to make it happen. Even if just for a few hours.

I sling my bag over my shoulder and walk out into the biting wind. Mikhail is trailing behind me, somehow managing to look both bored and threatening, dressed in that heavy coat he always wears when

we're in the States. We clamber straight into the back of a car, the driver greeting us with a nod before taking off toward my father's house.

We're quiet for a while as we sit in the car, the air between us familiar and uncomplicated. After a while, I finally speak. "I'll be making a stop before heading back to the UK."

Mikhail doesn't even blink. "Where?"

"Alone."

His jaw tightens just slightly, but he doesn't push. "Does your father know?"

"No." I glance out the window as the skyline stretches around us like a steel trap. "And he won't."

There's another pause, heavier this time.

"You're not exactly subtle, Yulian," he says eventually, voice low. "You know that, right?"

I smile faintly. "I don't have to be. Not with you."

He doesn't argue. He just exhales through his nose and mutters something in Russian under his breath that I pretend not to hear.

I rest my head back against the seat and let my thoughts drift, to Vaughn, to New York, to what might happen between us when we finally see each other in person again.

I don't know what this is between us. But I know I'm not done with him.

Not even close.

-

The gates creak open like they always do, loud, slow, and dramatic. The car pulls through the drive, tires crunching over the thin layer of frost coating the gravel, and I let my head fall back again as the house comes into view. It's all familiar angles and cold brick, the kind of place that's too quiet, too spotless, too heavy with history and secrets.

But then the front door bursts open before the car even fully stops, and for a brief, fleeting second, I feel something lighter settle into my chest.

Tati.

She's sprinting down the front steps like her life depends on it, coat flaring behind her, hair a windswept mess. She throws herself at me the second I step out of the car, arms wrapping tight around my waist as if afraid I might vanish before she gets a proper hug in. I stagger a bit, laughing under my breath as I catch her.

"I missed you, idiot," she says into my chest.

“I missed you too, brat,” I mutter, arms curling around her instinctively.

It’s always like this with her. No pretence, no masks. Just raw affection and the comfort of being known without having to explain a thing.

On the other side of the car, Mikhail steps out, scanning our surroundings. He and Tati make eye contact, and he nods in greeting.

Tati pulls back a little, just enough to look at me, her grin wide and unfiltered. “You look tired. Are you eating? You look skinny.”

I glance down at myself, taking in the thick muscles that cover my entire body, and raise an eyebrow at her.

She rolls her eyes and loops her arm through mine, already tugging me toward the house. “Come inside. It’s freezing. I even made some soup for you, so you don’t catch a cold.”

By that, she means she had our cook make it. In her defence, she probably did try to make it herself or at least help, but she likely just ended up producing something poisonous. Nevertheless, I appreciate the gesture.

Inside, the warmth of the entryway hits hard, the scent of pine cleaner and expensive polish settling into my lungs like smoke. But I’m not paying much attention. I’m watching her instead.

Tati chatters beside me like she hasn't seen another human in years, catching me up on trivial things, books she's read, shows she's hated, some scandal involving a girl she's never met but has decided to loathe on principle. Her voice fills the empty spaces in this house like a lifeline, and I let her talk, let her fill the silence that always stretches too long between these walls.

Internally, my thoughts are slower, quieter. She's the only thing in this place that still feels good. That still feels worth protecting.

We've always been close. Maybe because it was just us, once, two quiet kids trying not to draw attention to ourselves, learning how to navigate a world we didn't choose. Without our mother around, our father and whatever nanny's he hired were the only parental figures she had, so I always made sure to step up when she needed me.

She's softer than I am, brighter, cleverer in the ways that don't get you killed but do get you underestimated.

And I adore her. I really do.

I know how much she hates it here, how much she wants to leave, to run from the name, the weight, the expectations that hang over both of us like storm clouds. She talks about it sometimes, when she thinks I'm not really listening. When she lets the cracks show.

And I try. I try to help where I can. Little things. Small freedoms. Letting her feel like she has some kind of agency in a life we both know she doesn't fully control. I can't break her out of this world, not yet. But I can ease the grip it has on her fingers, loosen it piece by piece, until she can claw her way free.

She turns to me suddenly, grinning again. "You're being quiet. What,

you didn't miss my voice?"

"Sorry," I apologise. "Just happy to see you again after so long." She grins at me, before seemingly getting lost in her own world for a moment.

For a moment, it's quiet, her eyes flicking toward the window where frost has begun to form patterns against the glass. She pulls her knees up to her chest and rests her chin on them.

Then, softly, without looking at me, she says, "You'll talk to him, won't you? About me going back with you?"

I don't answer immediately. I let the question hang there for a second, watching her expression, hopeful but already braced for disappointment. She hates asking. Hates needing permission from him. I get that.

"I'll try," I say at last, keeping my voice low, steady.

She finally meets my gaze. "I mean it, Yulian. I can't stay here much longer. It's like, I don't even feel real when I'm in this house. I have no control over my life whatsoever. I know I'm still seventeen, but we both know nothing will change when I'm an adult."

My throat tightens, but I nod. "I know."

"And if he says no again-"

“I’ll handle it.”

She exhales, not quite relief, but something close to it. I wish I could promise her more. I wish I could guarantee that she'd be on the plane with me in a week, free of this place and the man who built it. But I can’t. Not yet.

So, I meet her halfway.

“I’ll ask him. I’ll push harder this time, I promise. But, just be prepared if you don’t get what you want.”

Tati nods and offers a small, tired smile. “Thank you. And don’t worry, I’m just happy you’re trying for me.”

And that’s all we say about it. Because around here, even hope has to speak quietly.

-

Tati’s still curled up in the armchair, her legs tucked under her, talking animatedly about something inconsequential, some new drama on the Russian version of The Bachelor, or how one of the housekeepers keeps mixing up the pantry labels again, when the door creaks open and Mikhail steps in. He doesn’t speak at first, simply crosses the room in a few short strides, arms folded tightly over his chest like he’s already bracing for something.

“Your father is ready,” he says finally. His voice is quiet but firm, clipped like it’s trying to hide something softer beneath the surface. I know better than to think there’s anything soft in Mikhail anymore,

not after everything he's seen, not after all the years he's spent in this house.

I hadn't even realised he had gone to speak with my father, I had assumed he had gone to relax or something and a pang of guilt shoots through me. I try to keep my father separate from anyone I care for and I plan on making sure my father didn't say anything cruel to Mikhail later.

Tati goes still. The sound of her voice drops off immediately, like a record needle scratching to silence. She looks at me with wide eyes, the corners of her mouth pulled tight with worry. She knows what that summons means. We both do.

I stand slowly, brushing invisible dust from my trousers, taking my time even though I know he hates that. My little rebellions are quiet, calculated. I don't give him the satisfaction of flinching, even if he isn't here to see it.

Tati's eyes are full of worry, and she looks at me like she is only now comprehending what she has asked me for. "I know you'll ask," Tati says, almost in a whisper. She reaches out and grabs my wrist lightly before I can walk past her. "And I want that. I really, really do. But…"

Her eyes flick to Mikhail for a moment, then back to me. "Don't push him too far. Please. I don't want this, me, to be the reason he hurts you worse. If you don't think now is the right time, then don't, okay?"

I force a small smile. It doesn't reach my eyes, but I know it's what she needs to see.

"I've handled him before," I say. "I'll be fine." I lean over and press a kiss to her forehead.

She lets go reluctantly, folding her hands tightly in her lap like she's trying to keep them from shaking.

The walk to the office is too quiet. Mikhail doesn't say a word, just leads the way down the hall. It's odd, this place reeks of old money, control and the kind of bloodshed that doesn't wash off. All things I usually love anywhere else, things I usually crave and relish in. But here, these feelings do nothing other than trouble me and make me feel so out of place I could scream. I hate this place with every fibre of my being.

On the way there, we pass the hallway that leads to the basement. My eyes flicker in that direction for a moment, before I put it totally out of mind. Now is not the time.

The office door is open, just enough to be intentional. It's always open a crack when he's expecting someone. It's meant to unnerve you, to make you feel like you're already trespassing.

I knock twice, hard enough to announce myself, then push the door open and step inside.

He's behind the desk, like always. That desk has been in our family for generations. Hand-carved, imported from somewhere expensive, the kind of wood that gleams under the light even when it's old. He sits in that massive chair like he owns the whole world. Maybe, in some ways, he does.

"Sit," he says, gesturing vaguely to the chair in front of him.

I do.

He watches me for a while without speaking. The silence stretches on, thick and uncomfortable. It's deliberate. Everything with him is deliberate.

Finally, he leans back and steeples his fingers. "So. How's university?"

I meet his eyes. "It's going well."

"Grades?"

"High."

"Connections?"

"Plenty."

He hums, low and noncommittal. "Any news worth reporting?"

I shrug. "Nothing that would interest you."

"Really?" His voice sharpens slightly. "And what about the Heathens? I understand their initiation was recent."

My spine goes stiff. I don't let it show.

“I heard it was the bloodiest one yet. Most violent too. I’d almost be impressed if I weren’t so disappointed they all survived it.”

I hold his gaze. “I wasn’t involved. I’ve fought some of them before, but I had nothing to do with their initiation.”

“Fought them?”

I nod. “Only when provoked.”

I don’t tell him about the underground fights. He would certainly not approve, especially if he knew why I was participating in them. Nevertheless, I can’t lie completely as if he found out, which he often does, there would be hell to pay.

He chuckles, but there’s no humour in it. “Always the victim, aren’t you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“But you imply it. Always painting yourself as some unwilling participant in this life. Like you don’t belong in it.”

I grit my teeth but say nothing. What could I? He’s entirely wrong. Unlike my sister, I do want this life. I crave it. The day my father finally kicks the bucket and leaves me to inherit his kingdom of violence, bloodshed and wealth will be the greatest of my life. This lifestyle is exactly where I belong, exactly what I need. I was born for it, every part of me is perfect for this world.

The only thing I'm unwilling in is being his son.

He stands.

I feel the shift in the room immediately, like the air itself grows heavier. He walks around the desk slowly, measured steps that echo across the hardwood floor. I resist the urge to track him with my eyes.

"Get up," he says quietly.

I hesitate.

"I said, get. Up."

I rise.

The punch comes faster than I can brace for. His ring catches my cheekbone, slicing skin. The pain is sharp and immediate, a hot sting that spreads across my face as I stumble backward.

I don't cry out. I never do.

Blood trickles down my cheek as the swelling starts to rise beneath the skin. My eye is already beginning to puff. The room spins slightly.

He stares down at me with contempt. "You're pathetic."

I don’t move. I don’t speak. I’ve learned the rules of this particular game.

“You think this is a playground? That you can waste your time with children and parties and pretend it’s all some joke?” He sneers, pacing in front of me now. “You’re my son. The future pakhan. And you act like a fucking spoiled brat who is completely incapable of taking a single thing seriously.”

Still, I say nothing.

He grabs me by the collar suddenly, dragging me forward until our faces are inches apart. I can smell the expensive cologne he douses himself in to cover the rot underneath. His grip is bruising.

“You’re weak. Unfocused. Sloppy. And if you don’t fix that, I will find someone else who can. You think just because you share my blood it makes you set to inherit everything I’ve built? No, as of now, you are still nothing but a disappointment who is yet to prove himself.”

He lets go abruptly, shoving me back.

“Get out of my sight.”

I pause, just for a second. Then I turn and walk out without a word.

In the hall, Mikhail is still waiting. He doesn’t react to the sight of me, bruised, bleeding, humiliated. He just steps aside silently.

I wipe the blood from my cheek with the sleeve of my jacket. It smears, a dark red streak across the expensive fabric. I don't care.

I don't look back.

The ache in my jaw is a dull throb now, radiating across my cheek like a warning I can't ignore. But I don't let myself linger on the pain. I've survived worse. Will survive worse.

My father's voice still echoes in my skull, laced with venom: You're weak. You're a disappointment.

I clench my fists hard enough that my nails dig into my palms.

Let him think I'm weak. Let him believe I'm just a spoiled, ungrateful heir.

The truth is, I'm playing a longer game than he can imagine. And one day, he'll find out just how well I've learned to survive under his rule.

It's almost funny how concerned my sister was at the idea of him hurting me if I dare ask him about her leaving, only for me to not even get the chance before he already has his hands on me. She needn't worry, though, I'll find another time to ask him before I leave, just not today.

I just need to get through the next few days and then I'm gone again. I'll get to see Vaughn again, in person. And everything will be better.

-

I can’t sleep.

No matter how many times I shift onto my side, flip my pillow over, kick the covers off and drag them back up again, it’s useless. The room is too cold, and yet the air feels heavy at the same time, pressing down on me like a weight I can’t shove off. Every shadow against the walls reminds me where I am, reminds me of what this house has seen, of what I’ve lived through inside these walls.

I stare up at the ceiling, blinking into the dark. I trace the swirls on the ceiling with my eyes. I listen to the faint ticking of the old grandfather clock out in the hallway.

I sigh heavily and drag a hand over my face. My cheek is still swollen where he hit me earlier. Every time my fingers brush the bruise; it throbs like my skin is remembering the impact all over again. I clench my jaw, trying to will the rage away.

After another fifteen minutes of lying there uselessly, I finally throw the blankets off and sit up. The floorboards are cold beneath my feet, but I barely notice. I need something to break up this endless cycle of thoughts swirling in my head.

I decide to head down to the kitchen and grab a glass of water or even a snack. It’s the middle of the night, so no one will be up.

I pull on a hoodie over my T-shirt and slip out of the room. My feet instinctively step in all the right places to make no sound, avoiding the squeaky floorboards I know like the back of my own hand.

The house is dark, only the moonlight shining in through the large windows casting faint glows and shadows across the walls. My steps are silent as I head toward the kitchen, the familiar route practically muscle memory at this point.

When I push the door open, I stop dead in my tracks.

Tati is already here.

She’s perched on one of the high stools at the island counter, her legs swinging back and forth beneath her in her pink pyjama pants, a tub of ice cream clutched in her hands. Her hair is loose around her shoulders, messy with sleep, and she’s eating straight from the container with a big silver spoon.

She looks up at the sound of the door and freezes too, mid-bite.

We stare at each other for a second before she breaks into a sheepish smile, licking the spoon.

"Couldn't sleep either?" she asks around a mouthful of ice cream.

I close the door behind me and shake my head, stepping further into the kitchen. "Something like that."

She nudges the tub toward me invitingly. "Want some?"

I almost laugh. Only Tati would think ice cream was a reasonable solution to insomnia in this place.

I grab a glass from the cabinet and fill it at the sink instead. "I'm good, thanks."

Tati shrugs and scoops another big bite into her mouth, swinging her feet idly. "This place sucks," she says matter-of-factly after a moment. Her voice is quiet, but there's a sharpness under it. Like the longer she stays here, the harder it is for her to pretend otherwise.

I nod and take a sip of water, letting the cold settle in my chest. "Yeah," I say. "It does."

We lapse into silence for a bit, the only sounds the occasional scrape of her spoon against the tub and the faint hum of the refrigerator. It's strange, most families would be asleep by now, peaceful in their beds. But here, the night is the safest time to be awake.

Tati sets the ice cream down on the counter and folds her arms on top of it, resting her chin on them.

"Did he hurt you badly?" she asks softly, eyeing the bruise on my cheek, her voice so small, so tentative, it almost kills me.

I hesitate. For a moment, I want to lie. Say no, say it's fine, say it's nothing. But she deserves the truth.

"Yeah," I say finally. "A little."

She looks at me then, really looks at me, and her mouth turns down in a way that makes her seem much younger than she is. Like when she was a little girl and used to cry when she scraped her knees, and I would pick her up and carry her home.

"I’m sorry," she whispers.

"You didn’t do anything wrong," I tell her immediately. It’s not her fault. It never was.

Tati plays with the edge of the tub, running her finger around the rim. "I hate him," she says, so quietly I almost don’t hear it. "I wish we could just... leave. Both of us."

I’m not sure how to respond to that. Because as much as she hates it, as much as she wants to leave and I understand why, I still don’t. Taking my father’s place, being the leader of the Chicago Bratva is what I was born for. I crave that control and few things fill me with as much glee as the thought of having all that power one day.

“What are you doing awake, Tati?” I eventually say. It is the middle of the night and I far as I remember, midnight ice cream was never something she does normally, so something must be wrong, or more wrong than usual.

She doesn’t say anything at first, eyes focused on the tub in her hands, but I can see the confliction in her expression, like she is working up the courage to answer me.

“I couldn’t stop thinking,” she finally whispers.

“Thinking about what?”

Blinking slowly, she takes a deep breath. “I hate it here,” she says like

she's confessing something she isn't supposed to say out loud. "I hate everything about it. This house. This life. I feel like I'm… suffocating."

I put the glass down and give her my full attention.

"I'm always here. Always inside. Never allowed to leave. I don't even have any friends. You know that? I haven't had a proper friend since I was twelve. And even she stopped writing after a while because her father said mine was dangerous."

Her voice breaks slightly at the end, and she bites down on her bottom lip to hold it in.

"All I want, Yulian, is to be free. That's it. I don't want to be part of any of this." She gestures around the room like it represents the entire empire.

"I don't want to marry someone I don't love. I don't want to be forced to play happy mafia daughter at some event. I don't want to be paraded like a prize."

My chest tightens. She's only seventeen. And already, she knows what the rest of her life is supposed to look like.

Tati looks away, her voice turning quieter. "I don't even want kids, Yulian. It's not that I don't like them, or I'm scared of giving birth or anything like that. I just…"

She shrugs helplessly.

“I don’t want to be tied down. I want to travel. I want to see the world. I want to live in Spain for a while. Or Morocco. Or Greece. I want to learn to cook weird street food and get lost in cities where no one knows who I am.”

She meets my eyes again. “I want to visit you whenever I feel like it, not because I had to beg permission. I want to choose what I do every day without having to report it to a bodyguard or worry about who’s watching. I just want a life that’s mine, Yulian. Is that too much to ask?”

I feel her words like a punch to the chest.

I step toward her and reach across the counter and place my hand over hers. “No,” I say. “It’s not too much. It’s not too much at all.”

Her eyes are glassy now, but she blinks quickly, refusing to let them spill. I squeeze her fingers. “But you know how he is. Right now… while he’s still in power… it’s hard. It’s dangerous. If I push too far, too fast…”

“I know,” she cuts in. “I know, Yulian. I just… needed to say it. Out loud. I needed you to hear it.”

I nod. “I did. And I promise you something, Tati.”

She looks at me, like she’s afraid to believe it.

“One day,” I say, “he won’t be in charge anymore. One day, I will be the one in control. And when that day comes, I’ll give you everything you want. Everything. The freedom. The travel. The peace. I will find

a way.”

Her lower lip trembles.

“You won’t have to ask anyone ever again. You’ll come and go as you please. You’ll be whoever you want to be. No more cages. No more rules. Just you, free.”

She nods, and then finally lets herself cry. Just a little. And I get up and walk around the island and pull her into a hug. She clings to me like she’s drowning and I’m the last thing keeping her above the surface.

-

We linger in the kitchen a little longer after that, voices low, shoulders close. Tati’s leaning against the counter, poking at the now-melted tub of ice cream, her eyes clearer but still tired. We talk about nothing for a few more minutes, TV shows she’s been watching and what not. It’s light conversation, the kind that feels like it’s buying us just a few more minutes of peace. But eventually, I nudge her shoulder.

“You should get some sleep, Tati.”

She looks up at me, sceptical. “Only if you do too.”

“I will,” I lie, offering her a crooked half-smile. “Just going top up my water.” I’ll certainly climb back into bed. But get some sleep? Not tonight, I don’t think.

She eyes me for a second, but then gives in with a sigh and a small nod. “Okay. But you better not stay up too long thinking about... things.”

“No promises.”

She shuffles past me, still barefoot and sleepy, and pauses at the door. “Thanks for talking to me,” she says, her voice soft.

“Anytime,” I reply. “Always.”

Then she disappears into the hallway, and the quiet settles back in.

I move to the sink, refill the glass again, watching the water swirl like it holds some kind of answer I’m too tired to ask for. I twist the tap off and walk to the door, pushing it open-

And nearly bump straight into Mikhail.

I jerk back slightly, surprised. “Jesus-”

“Sorry,” he says quickly, holding up his hands to show he means no harm.

“What are you doing?” I ask, heart still racing a little. “It’s almost two in the morning.”

“Could ask you the same.”

I raise the glass. “Couldn’t sleep.”

He lifts his own water bottle in reply. “Same.”

Then, after a pause, he nods back toward the kitchen. “I was heading in but saw you and Tati already in there. Figured I’d leave you two alone. You were clearly in the middle of something important.”

My brows pull together. “You were listening?”

“No,” Mikhail says quickly. “Not like that. I just, heard voices. Figured it wasn’t my place. Didn’t want to intrude.”

I let out a breath, nodding. “It’s fine. Thanks.”

We both stand there for a second in the hallway, a strange silence stretching between us.

“You alright?” he asks after a moment, his voice quieter now.

“Yeah,” I answer reflexively, like I’ve been trained to say it. Like it’s second nature.

Mikhail tilts his head slightly. “You sure?”

I look at him. Really look. He’s not buying it. He never does.

But he doesn't push.

Instead, he says, "You know I care about you, right?"

I blink.

"I mean it," he goes on. "Not just because I'm assigned to you or whatever. Not just as your bodyguard. You're... you're my best friend, Yulian. Always have been. And if there's ever anything, anything, you want to talk about… I'm here. You don't have to carry all this on your own."

Something tightens in my chest.

I nod. Swallow. "Thanks."

He claps me on the shoulder, then steps back like he knows I'm not ready to say more than that. "Alright. I'll let you go get some sleep, so you have plenty of energy to cause chaos tomorrow."

I manage a weak laugh, nodding at him.

He smirks, and we part ways, him toward the guest wing, me back upstairs.

-

It’s snowing lightly as we drive. The windows of the car are tinted dark enough to make the world outside feel further away, as if it’s not really happening. My father and I sit side by side in the back, the leather seats creaking every now and then as the car bumps along the icy road toward the airport. Mikhail is in the front seat next to the driver, silent and stiff as always when Father is present. No one speaks for a while.

I stare out the window, watching the snow gather along the shoulders of the road, trying not to fidget. The last few days have been... productive. Or at least tolerable. My cheek still aches where he hit me, the swelling reduced to a dull, bruised throb. But I’ve kept my head down. I’ve listened. I’ve followed instructions. I’ve done the work, strategic briefings, coded reports, sorting files and making negotiations. It’s exhausting, but I’ve enjoyed it, even with my father’s presence.

All of this is just stuff I’ll be ruling over one day. Getting a taste of it now excites me. Though, it does feel like my father has been watching me with a different kind of calculation this time. Less disdain. Almost... interest. Like I might actually be worth something if I just behave.

I know how to act when I need to. And for the past forty-eight hours, I’ve been the version of myself he wants to see. The disciplined son. The heir. The future.

I’ve had to keep Tati out of sight for most of it. She understands. I’ve told her I’m working on it.

My father finally speaks, his voice like gravel scraping the inside of a glass.

“You’ve been tolerable this week.”

I glance sideways at him, wary. “Thanks.”

He doesn’t smile, but the tone isn’t hostile. That, in itself, is a small miracle.

“Try and maintain this version of yourself,” he continues, fixing me with a slow look. “You’re more useful like this. Less embarrassing.”

I bite the inside of my cheek to keep from reacting. Just nod.

He leans back in his seat, arms folding across his chest. “Still… I heard something interesting yesterday.”

I tense. He waits. Dramatic bastard.

“Apparently, Vaughn Morozov has requested a transfer. To King’s University.”

The words hit harder than they should. I sit up straighter before I can stop myself. “He what?”

Father raises an eyebrow. “You weren’t aware?”

I recover quickly. “No. I wasn’t.”

Guess we will have something to talk about when I get to New York.

The words excite me though, my heart pounding as I fight to keep a grin down.

He studies me, as if measuring to see if I'm lying. "I have my contacts. Anyway, it is for this reason you must behave. No more childish actions. If you want to start a war, wait until you're back on American soil. The UK is smaller, and we have less allies. Don't be stupid."

I open my mouth, ready to say something. To argue. To remind him I'm not a child and he needs to stop treating me like one. But then I remember Tati. The way her voice cracked in the kitchen. The way she looked at me like I might actually be able to change something. I haven't kept my promise yet.

I swallow it all down. Clench my jaw. And nod.

"I understand," I say evenly. "I'll do better."

He's quiet for a moment. Then, surprisingly, he hums, satisfied. "Good."

It's rare that he doesn't follow that with a threat. I let the silence stretch a little longer before testing the waters.

"There's one thing I wanted to ask," I begin carefully.

He doesn't respond, but I know that means I can continue.

"I was thinking... it might be good for Tati to return to the UK after

the holidays. She's been keeping up with her work remotely, but the isolation isn't doing her any favours. It would do her some good to be around others her age again. Even if only for a term."

He turns his head, and I can feel the weight of his scepticism before he even speaks.

"She doesn't need distractions. Especially not the kind that come with that campus."

I nod slowly. "I know. But I think it could be a good opportunity."

My stomach tightens at what I'm about to say. But it's the only way I can think of to get him to agree.

He narrows his eyes.

"Some of the sons of our allies are still there," I add smoothly. "If Tati is visible, if she's... well placed, it could help you build connections. She's growing up. People are starting to notice."

It sickens me to talk about her like this, especially after her words in the kitchen that night. She's only seventeen, for fucks sake. But, I know how my father's mind works and he will take any pathetic opportunity to gain power, even if it means selling his own daughter.

Besides, just because I suggest it, doesn't mean it will actually happen. I'll gauge out the eyes of any boy who looks at her even slightly inappropriately.

There's a pause. Then a flicker of something in his eyes. Not warmth, but... interest. The gears shifting.

"Mm," he murmurs. "I'll think about it."

It's not a yes. But it's more than a no.

I incline my head. "Thank you."

He doesn't respond again. Just returns his gaze to the window, and we lapse into silence as the city fades behind us.

But my heart beats a little louder. Because this, this was the opening.

And if he's thinking about it... I'll make damn sure he agrees.

-

I ascend the steps to the jet slowly, drawing out the moment like a final act in a scene I'm not particularly eager to repeat. The air is sharp against my skin, dry and brutal in that uniquely Chicago way that feels less like weather and more like punishment. I don't turn around. I don't need to.

The warmth hits as soon as I step into the cabin, wrapping around me like expensive perfume and old money, familiar, a little suffocating. I slide into my seat, letting the leather creak under me, stretching my legs like I own the place because, in truth, I do. The whisky on the side table glints in the light, aged and precise, poured in anticipation

of a flight I'm not actually taking. I don't touch it. My mind's too loud, my blood too fast. It would only get in the way.

Outside the window, the runway blurs and refocuses in the dim light, but I'm not watching it. I'm replaying the past few days with my father, measuring every step, every word, every glance I tolerated without biting back. I laughed when he expected me to, answered his questions with just the right edge of maturity to make him feel like I'm finally becoming the man he wants me to be. And maybe I am, just not in the way he thinks. He said I was doing better. That he might even consider letting Tati leave, if I stayed on this path. That, in his eyes, was a reward. To me, it was leverage.

So when he asked Mikhail to stay behind for a few extra days to train new guards, I didn't argue. I didn't ask why. I didn't even blink. Because whether it was intentional or not, it gave me exactly what I needed: space. No watchdog. No lectures.

The pilot knows. I made sure of that before I even left the house, pulled him aside and gave him the new destination in a voice calm enough to imply this wasn't a request. He nodded. He's paid well enough to understand that discretion matters more than obedience when it comes to me. So now, instead of heading back to London, we're flying to New York.

And I can hardly sit still.

It's not nervous energy. It's hunger. I've been waiting for this moment, counting the days since I last saw Vaughn in the flesh. I want to see him again, need to. I want to study his face up close, catch the flickers of emotion he's too proud to show anyone else, push him just far enough to make him snap and then pull him back again. That's what we do. That's what we've always done.

Part of me knows this isn't healthy. That obsession isn't love and fixation isn't affection. But I don't care. I've never cared. Love, for people like us, was never meant to be clean. It was always going to be something carved out of bone and bruises and whatever we could salvage from the wreckage of our fathers.

Vaughn is a storm I've chosen to run into every time. And maybe he hates me for it. Maybe he wants to escape. But he never truly does. He stays. He watches. He waits. And if he truly wanted me gone, he would've done something by now.

So I tell myself that he wants this. That deep down, buried beneath all that composure and inherited anger, there's a part of him that feels the same desperate pull I do. After all, it was him that asked me to visit, not the other way around.

The jet lifts off, and I don't look out the window. I've seen enough of Chicago to last a lifetime. I'll own it one day, anyway. The only thing that matters now is what's waiting for me on the other side of this flight.

Vaughn.

-

I step out into the biting New York air, slamming the car door shut behind me with more force than necessary, though I hardly notice. My eyes are fixed on the building in front of me,some old warehouse tucked behind a rusted gate and shielded by graffiti-tagged walls and years of industrial neglect. It's ugly in a way that borders on theatrical. Dilapidated. Forgotten. A place for secrets.

Which, of course, makes it perfect.

I smile.

Because this is so Vaughn. He could've picked anywhere, one of those sleek glass towers in Manhattan, some penthouse with a minibar and a skyline view, but no. He picks this. A place that looks like a crime scene in a B-rated movie. A little dangerous. A little dramatic. Completely unnecessary. It's theatricality disguised as austerity, and it's so like him I can't help but be charmed.

And honestly, I like it. I like the hiddenness of it, the privacy. I like that this place has no eyes, no windows, no witnesses. It feels like a secret he's giving me, even if he didn't say it aloud.

The gravel crunches beneath my boots as I approach the entrance, a heavy steel door just slightly ajar. Warm, golden light leaks from the narrow crack at its base, casting a glow against the cold concrete ground. I reach out and push it open, the metal moaning under my touch as if reluctant to let me in.

I look through the doorway, peering inside. It's dim, but not dark. The place is bigger than I expected, vaulted ceilings with exposed beams, mismatched bulbs dangling from cords above, casting long, fractured shadows across the floor. There's the scent of dust and something older beneath it, something warm. The windows are all sealed or blacked out, and whatever furniture remains has been pushed aside, leaving a wide, open space that stretches out before me.

I don't see him yet, but I know he's here. I can feel it like a sixth sense. That strange pull in the centre of my chest that only wakes up when he's close.

I grin, fingers brushing the edge of the entrance, taking my time.

There’s no need to rush. He brought me here. He wants me here. These last few weeks of us texting constantly, bonding and making him realise just how well we get along have all led to this moment.

Whatever this is, it’s already perfect.

He’s already made it perfect.

And I’m exactly where I want to be.

I step inside.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed as always. sorry for a no vaughn chap but i wanted to focus on explaining yulians home/family a little more. i hope it is what you guys were hoping/expecting.

i do think you will enjoy the next chapter, though. big things will happen.
thanks for your support!

Chapter Eleven

Chapter Notes

> hello again. it has been a while. sorry it has taken so long but i have now finished my exams and so for the rest of the summer all i have to worry about is my part time job, so updates should start coming a little more regularly now. thanks to those who have patiently waited and for those who are seeing this story for the first time, welcome!
>
> also, for anyone that does rereads at all, as it has been a while, i did reread my own work before writing this so i could refresh myself. it was only a skim read, but still, i spotted plenty of grammar and spelling mistakes throughout haha so i have reuploaded all the chapters with those that i spotted now fixed. nothing about the actual story has changed in the slightest, literally just grammar and spelling, but still, if you reread and feel like something has changed, that will be it.
>
> ill add some more thoughts at the end about the actual chapter and my thought process etc, but i dont want to give any spoilers yet. enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Yulian

-

The last few weeks have been the best of my life.

I know that sounds stupid, and maybe it is, but I don't care. They've been ours, mine and Vaughn's. Secret and quiet and slow. When the whole house sleeps and I creep down into the dark, carrying a flashlight under my shirt and whatever scraps of food I managed to sneak from the kitchen. When I open the basement door and he looks up from the corner where he always waits, guarded at first, like he still expects me to hurt him or shout or disappear. But then I sit down beside him, and we talk.

We talk about stupid things. Games. Stories. Sometimes we speak in Russian and argue over who speaks it better and has the better accent. We always laugh when we say it wrong. Sometimes he makes up stories that aren't funny, but I laugh anyway because he looks proud of them. We play games with buttons and paper, or I bring cards, or we just sit in silence. It's not awkward. It never is.

I ask questions. He doesn't always answer. But I never push. Well, okay, sometimes I do but I think he has grown to like that about me. And sometimes, when he falls asleep before I leave in the middle of the night, I admire the weight of him sleeping next to me, just close enough that our shoulders touch. And I pretend I'm not wide awake, grinning like an idiot.

That's why I'm sneaking back down tonight. Again. I've barely made it halfway down the hall when I hear the sound.

A voice. Low, muffled and sharp.

My father's voice.

I freeze, breath catching in my throat, and glance toward the office. The door is closed, but the sound carries through anyway. The tone is unmistakable. He sounds angry. Controlled, but just barely. I edge a little closer, toes silent on the carpet, and press myself to the wall near the door. I can't make out the words. Just the heat. The growing fury. He's shouting now, and the sound of something, a glass, maybe, shattering against the wall makes me flinch.

Then the door swings open.

I move fast, ducking into the shadows of the hallway, pressed between a

cabinet and the curve of the stair rail. He doesn't see me. He doesn't even try to look. His eyes are wild and unfocused; his mouth set in a snarl I rarely see when it isn't directed at me. He storms past, down the hall and toward the basement.

He doesn't notice he's being followed.

Which means he's angry enough to be stupid. That scares me more than anything.

I creep after him as quietly as I can, staying pressed to the wall, one foot hovering above the next stair as I watch him yank the basement door open and disappear down into the dark.

I don't go all the way. I crouch at the top of the stairs, as I've done so many times before, though never with this much anxiety. With my knees tucked to my chest, peering through the hole in the wall. The light is turned off for some reason. And as ashamed as I am to admit, I'm sort of grateful. I don't want him to be alone right now, but I'm barely controlling myself from just being able to hear, let alone if I were able to see. I hear the weight of his boots on the concrete and then silence.

And then-

The sound of skin against skin. A thud. A cry.

I freeze.

I know that sound. I've heard it in a mirror.

He doesn't speak. Doesn't yell. Just hits. The dull, horrible rhythm of fists on flesh. The sharp gasps that escape Vaughn's throat. I might not be able to see anything, but I can definitely hear him trying to fight back. Can hear the scuff of his feet as he shifts. A grunt. A sharp wheeze.

"You little piece of shit," my father mutters, low and furious. "Think your name makes you untouchable? Think your father can bargain your way out of this?"

Another strike. Another cry. Vaughn's voice cracks this time.

Something in my chest breaks.

I grip my thighs as if I'm forcibly holding them in place until my knuckles ache, and every part of me wants to move. To go down there. To pull my father off him. To hit back, even if it means I'll be next. But I don't. I can't. My legs won't move.

And the worst part, the most shameful part, is the heat rising in my throat isn't just fear. It's rage.

Not because my father is hurting someone.

But because he's touching Vaughn.

Because someone else's hands are on him, and it isn't me.

That makes it worse. It makes it unbearable.

My father is muttering again, breathless with fury. I hear something about the call. About how "the old bastard still thinks he can threaten me." Something about "sending a message."

I hear the click of a phone camera.

I know what he's doing.

"Let's see how your father likes this," he spits, breath ragged. "Let's see how much longer he drags his feet once he gets a little preview of what's next."

And then he's stomping up the stairs again.

I jump back into the shadows, heart racing, breath shallow. He brushes past me without noticing. Doesn't even look. And I wait. I wait until I hear the door slam upstairs. Until the silence creeps back in.

Only then do I move.

I run down the basement stairs so fast I nearly fall. I don't bother with the light. I know the shape of the room. I know where he is.

He's curled on his side against the far wall, arms wrapped around his ribs, blood smeared across his cheek and dripping from his nose. His breathing is shallow and uneven, and when he sees me, he tries to sit up.

"Don't," I say quickly, dropping to my knees beside him. "It's okay. Don't

move."

He winces, but the corner of his mouth lifts slightly. "Your dad hits like a truck."

I laugh, but it sounds too much like a sob.

"Idiot," I whisper, and touch his face gently. He doesn't flinch. He just watches me.

"You were here?"

I nod. "He was on the phone. With someone. I think... I think your family won't agree to whatever deal he wants. He's angry."

Vaughn doesn't respond right away. Just exhales slowly, like it hurts. "There is no price possible my father wouldn't be willing to pay to keep me safe. I know it. He's told me."

He sounds so absolutely sure of himself that I believe him. Yet, I feel saddened, because I know my own father would never say the same.

I press my hand against his bruised ribs, trying to be careful. He lets me. The sight of him like this, battered and quiet and barely holding it together, does something to me I can't name. It makes everything else fall away.

I could keep him here. I know that. I could hide him, lie for him, sneak down every night and pretend it doesn't matter what happens when I'm not here. I could do it. But I know now how this ends.

My father won’t let this go. He’ll kill him.

"I’m going to help you escape," I whisper.

Vaughn blinks, and for a moment he looks too stunned to speak. "What?"

"I’ll figure something out. I don’t know how yet, but I will. I swear."

"Yulian..."

"I want to keep you," I say, and my voice cracks. "I want you to stay. But I want you alive more."

He looks at me like he doesn’t know whether to believe it. Like he’s scared to. I almost wish he would deny me, say he would rather stay with me too. But he doesn’t. Because unlike me, his family loves him enough that he will never choose me.

So, I just say it again.

"I’ll get you out. I promise."

And this time, he believes me.

-

Present Day

Vaughn

-

The warehouse is dark, but not enough. Light leaks in through shattered windows and between rusted beams, striping Yulian in silver as he steps inside. He's confident, oblivious and fucking radiant.

I stay in the shadows, watching.

He doesn't see me yet. Doesn't know I'm here. Doesn't know what I've planned. I feel anger flood through me as I remember why we are here, why I need revenge.

He moves like he owns the place. Like he owns everything. Like he hasn't been wrapping himself around that professor, whispering into his ear like the snake he is. Like he hasn't been grinding up against strangers while telling me I'm the only one in his life. I told him I don't share. I told him not to test me.

And yet, he's still breathing.

I clench my jaw, tasting metal. Maybe tonight that changes.

But just as I step forward, ready to drag him down from that pedestal he's built for himself, I see it. A shadow blooming on his cheekbone, nearly gone now but still there. A bruise. Faint. Yellowed at the edges. Easily missed from having a few days to heal.

It hits me harder than it should.

Why the fuck do I care?

I should be glad. I should want to see him hurt. Hell, if all goes to plan, he'll be leaving this warehouse with a lot more bruises, courtesy of yours truly.

But I'm not glad. I'm angry. Furious, actually. The idea of someone laying a hand on him makes something twist in me, hot and sharp and possessive. Mine. Even if I want to destroy him, even if I plan to, he's still mine.

I step out of the dark.

He turns at the sound, and when his eyes land on me, something lights up behind them. Like he's been waiting. Like he's pleased to see me. Like I haven't spent the last few days plotting how to cut him out of my life and show him exactly what happens when you cross me.

"Who gave you that bruise?" I ask, my voice low, tighter than I mean it to be.

His face twitches for a moment, something unreadable crossing his eyes. It's gone as soon as it's there, however, and instead his grin spreads slow, hungry and delighted. Of course he's happy I noticed.

He steps closer, eyes flicking up and down my face like I'm the one under a spotlight now. "One of your precious Heathens. Nikolai. Last fight of ours was real fun."

Nikolai. That bastard's too aggressive in the ring, but at least it makes sense. It wasn't Kayden. Wasn't some faceless hookup who thought he could touch what's mine.

I breathe out through my nose, something that might be relief, might be satisfaction.

I smile.

The moment I lunge at him; it's without ceremony or warning. No insults exchanged, no posturing, no theatrical lead-in. Just a brutal collision of my fist against his ribs, and the satisfying sound of breath leaving his lungs in a choked grunt. He stumbles back with a startled curse, the motion clumsy and unguarded, and for once he doesn't have time to wear that smug grin he usually greets me with.

"What the fuck-?"

He doesn't finish. I'm already on him again, striking hard and fast, my knuckles slamming against his shoulder before he ducks and recovers enough to swing back. He catches my side with a solid punch, and the pain ripples, but I don't falter. We're grappling now, bodies colliding in a mess of adrenaline and heat, the metallic tang of blood already in the air as fists keep flying.

"Jesus, Vaughn," Yulian snaps between breaths, catching my arm as I try to hook another hit. "Is this a new kink I wasn't informed about, or did I forget your birthday?"

I shove him off, not answering. I don't want to give him the satisfaction of knowing anything, not yet. Not while my rage is still

louder than reason. He stumbles but catches his balance quickly, brushing a hand through his hair, damp with sweat and dishevelled now.

He flashes me a grin, but there's confusion under it. "Seriously, what is this? I'd ask if I slept with Camilla again, but, well, we both know that couldn't have happened." His smirk only serves to piss me off more. He knows damn well who he slept with, and it wasn't Camilla. Not this time, anyway.

My silence only fuels his curiosity. He circles me like we're in a ring, his eyes sharp, but playful.

"*Is* it Camilla again? Because I thought we got all that tension out of our systems already. I mean, we've had a pretty good thing going these last few weeks."

Still, I don't speak. I swing instead, the sound of the blow loud in the hollowed-out warehouse, his head snapping to the side as he reels from the hit. When he recovers, he laughs, breathless. "You're not going to tell me, then? Going for the whole strong, silent, brooding type?"

I drive my shoulder into his chest, shoving him back into the concrete wall. He groans at the impact, eyes narrowing now. "If I wanted someone to beat me senseless without context, I'd have stayed home with my father," he snaps, and before I can actually process what he just said, he is pushing me back and ramming his knee into my thigh.

I grunt, staggering, but my hand snatches his shirt before he can move far, dragging him toward me again. The fight doesn't slow. We're a blur of limbs, of bodies slamming against each other in a violent rhythm that neither of us seem willing to end. There's blood dripping down the side of his face and I wouldn't be surprised if the ache in my

side is a cracked rib.

"You want to fight?" he pants. "Fine. But at least tell me what crime I'm answering for. Because as far as I remember, you were the one that invited me. And there certainly wasn't this much anger in those texts telling me you missed me."

If I didn't think he were incapable of it, I'd say there's a hint of hurt on his face. And so finally, I crack.

"You betrayed me. Again," I grit out.

That stops him. Just a beat. Enough for a shift in his gaze. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Playing dumb just seems to revive my rage all over again. I hit him again. "Like Camilla did."

Yulian's jaw tightens, his expression folding into something darker, warier. "Don't compare me to her."

"Why not? You both knew exactly what you were doing. You both knew exactly how to hurt me."

He grabs my arm mid-swing, twisting it as he shoves me backwards. I slam into the edge of the table behind me, breath catching. "If this is about something real, then say it. Stop hitting me like I'm a fucking mirror you're hoping to crack."

"You’re already cracked."

"Takes one to know one, Mishka."

I advance on him again, slower now, but with no less fury. He doesn’t move, watching me with that same infuriating, unreadable expression. He lets me get close enough to grab him by the collar and shove him back into the wall again.

"You told me you weren’t seeing anyone else. You said you weren’t even interested in anyone else."

He blinks. "What?"

"Don't play fucking dumb."

"I’m not-"

"Don’t lie to me."

He opens his mouth, then closes it, confused and wary. "You really think that? That I’m sleeping around behind your back?"

"I think you never stopped," I say, my voice like stone. "I think I was the idiot who assumed loyalty went both ways. Who, yet again, for some stupid, pathetic reason, believed you weren’t lying to me as you’ve done so many times before."

Yulian lets out a breath, one that sounds halfway to a laugh, but bitter. "So that's what this is."

"You flirt with anything that breathes. You look at people like they're tools, or toys. You don't know how to want something without trying to destroy it."

His expression hardens. "And you don't know how to want something without trying to own it."

"I never touched anyone else. Not once. Not even when I hated you so much, I couldn't breathe. Not after Camilla and especially not after we started texting." I know that there is pain leaking through my voice when the only emotion I want to feel is anger and vengeance. But when it comes to him, I just can't control myself.

"And yet you pretended you didn't want me."

"Because wanting you makes me weak."

Yulian laughs again, sharp and bright. "There it is. You hate how I make you feel, so you invent reasons to punish me for it."

"You fucked your professor!" I shout, fed up of him pretending to be the victim.

But, something strange happens. I expected him to either act like it wasn't a big deal, or just straight up deny it altogether. But, instead, he just looks at me, his mouth open. I search his eyes, trying to find a hint of enjoyment, of knowing. But all I see is pure bafflement. And I begin to doubt myself.

After a second of gaping like a fish, he finally manages to find a word. “What?” is all he manages to get out. He looks genuinely confused and I feel dread settle at the bottom of my stomach. I know he has lied to me before, tricked me and betrayed me. But, this time, for some reason, I truly think I might have been the one to fuck up.

“You think I did what?” Yulian finally says when I don’t respond.

Despite my doubts, I can’t ignore the photo I saw. "You fucked Kayden Lockwood. Your professor.”

He stares at me for a long, silent moment, and then he laughs. Full, breathy, unhinged laughter that echoes off the walls. "Kayden? You think I’m fucking Kayden?"

I don’t answer.

He steps closer, still grinning. "That’s adorable. I didn’t think you had it in you to be jealous."

"I’m not jealous,” I reply immediately. Too fast.

"You are," he says, pleased now, his voice lower, slicker. "And it looks good on you. That little edge to your voice. That violence. I should flirt with more people in front of you."

He’s stood right in front of me now, but I don’t move. He walks his fingers slowly up the centre of my chest, teasing, taunting. "You imagined it, didn’t you? Me on my knees in his office. Making soft

little sounds for him. Giving him what you want me to give you."

"Shut up."

"Did it make you hard, Vaughn? Or just angry? I can never tell with you."

I slam him back against the wall again, my hand at his throat now, not squeezing, but holding.

"You're delusional."

"No, you're delusional," he says, quieter now, eyes burning into mine. "I haven't fucked anyone. Especially not Kayden. And if I ever did, it wouldn't be some simpering academic who used to hang out with the dinosaurs. In fact, it wouldn't be anyone other than you."

My grip loosens. Slowly.

"Why?" I ask, the words more breath than voice.

He doesn't smile this time. "Because like I've said before, it's always been you. Even when I hated you. Even when I tried to replace you. Nothing fucking worked."

I step back, not because I'm letting go, but because my pulse is too loud and my thoughts are too fast. He breathes heavily, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "You want to fight me? Fine. But not for a fantasy. Not for something I didn't do."

The rage simmers lower now. Not gone. Just shifting. "Then what am I supposed to do with all of this?" I ask.

“Whatever you want, Mishka,” he smirks at me.

I breath for a few moments. I barely think before I make my next move. If I did, I probably would have chosen a different one.

Fuck it.

I grab his shirt again, fisting the fabric tight, and this time I don’t shove him away, I yank him forward, dragging his mouth to mine with more force than finesse. It isn’t a kiss, not really. It’s a collision. Our teeth knock hard enough to make my lip split, and I taste blood immediately, sharp and metallic on my tongue, but I don’t care. He doesn’t either. He groans into my mouth like the pain is welcome, like it’s part of the ritual, like he’s missed it.

His hands are on me instantly, gripping my shoulders, my arms, anything he can reach. He clutches like he’s trying to crawl inside my skin, like he’s starving and I’m the first solid thing he’s touched in days. Our mouths don’t break for breath, only shift, his lips dragging across mine, wet and bruised, teeth scraping against the corner of my mouth until it feels raw. His tongue slides against mine and I grab the back of his neck, pulling him deeper, harder.

The kiss is violent, not just in force but in intent. There’s no sweetness in it, no apology, no longing disguised as affection. It’s rage turned physical, desire weaponised. He moans when I bite his lip again, hands fumbling between us as he tugs at my belt with more urgency than skill.

I knock his hands away and do it myself, working the buckle open, unzipping my jeans just enough to relieve the pressure building beneath. My cock is already hard, straining against the fabric, and he notices immediately, pulling back just far enough to look down.

“Fuck,” he whispers, voice thick and hungry, the word almost reverent. “You’re so worked up.”

He reaches for me again, but I move first, spinning him and pressing him against the nearest table, my hand gripping the back of his neck, keeping him there. He groans at the roughness, pushing back into me, grinding his hips against mine in a taunt that only fuels the fire beneath my skin.

“Get off,” I mutter, reaching around to shove his trousers down over his hips.

“Gladly,” he breathes, already hard and leaking.

I wrap my hand around him, and he shudders, body jerking against the table as I stroke him once, then again, firm and steady. He groans, loud this time, head falling forward as he braces himself on his elbows.

“Fuck, Vaughn… that’s…”

I don’t let him finish. I find a rhythm that makes his knees shake, twisting my wrist at the head, watching the muscles in his back twitch each time I squeeze harder. He thrusts into my fist, needy and desperate, and I can hear the obscene sounds of skin against skin, the wet slap of it echoing in the space between us.

“You like that?” I ask, voice low, lips brushing the shell of his ear.

He nods frantically. “Yes. Yes. Don’t fucking stop.”

I don’t. I pump him faster, tighter, until his breathing grows ragged and his body tightens. He comes with a broken cry, his hips jerking as hot release spills over my hand. He sags against the table, chest heaving, body trembling beneath my grip.

He turns his head just enough to look back at me, eyes glassy, lips parted. His lips turn into a sly grin. “Your turn.”

He turns grabs my waist, manhandling me until we have switched. I’m sat on the table with him standing between my legs, his hands still gripping me tightly. His lips attack mine again, even as both our chests heave together. If it were anyone else, I’d break the wrists of anyone who treated me like some toy. But with him, all it does is make my cock thicken.

He pulls back from me, taking just a second to stare me in the eyes. Then, he drops to his knees in front of me, still breathless, but grinning now, wicked and wild. He pulls my jeans further down, freeing me completely, and strokes me once with a warm, confident hand before leaning in.

The first touch of his mouth makes me groan and I slide one hand into his hair, gripping it tightly.

He doesn’t ease in or tease, he takes me deep immediately, wet heat surrounding me in one long, deliberate pull. I gasp and grip the edge of the table behind me with my other hand, head tipping back as his tongue swirls around the head before sliding down again.

Immediately, he gags at the press of me against the back of his throat, but it doesn't dissuade him. His hands grip my hips tightly, anchoring himself as he builds a steady rhythm, sucking and swallowing like he knows exactly how to drive me insane. I look down and see him watching me through his lashes, cheeks hollowed around my cock, his mouth swollen and red, and I swear I could come from the sight alone.

He moans around me, the vibration shooting straight through my spine. He takes me deeper, the back of his throat tightening, eyes fluttering closed for a moment before opening again, locked on mine. He wants me to watch. Wants me to see what he does to me.

"Fuck," I hiss, fingers digging into the table. "Just like that."

He hums in response, the sensation unbearable, perfect. I thrust once, carefully, and he takes it, adjusts, encourages it. His lips are wet, jaw working as he lets me fuck his mouth with slow, measured strokes. I feel myself getting closer, the tension winding sharp and tight beneath my skin.

When I come, I bite down on a moan, hips jerking forward as he swallows everything, never pulling away, never faltering. He only lets me go once I've stopped twitching, and even then, he kisses the base of my stomach softly, then looks up, breathless and wrecked.

After a moment, he stands and doesn't hesitate to pull me in for a kiss again, despite how little breath we have left. Just when I think I'm truly going to run out of air, he wraps his hand tightly around my throat, cutting it off completely. He ravages my mouth, squeezing with the same force he kisses me with.

Despite my lack of breath, I don't try to stop him. If anything, the

feeling makes my now depleted cock twitch. I don't think I've ever been ready to go again so soon, but he has always been the exception for me.

It's not the first I've experimented with choking, though Camilla wasn't the hugest fan, so it wasn't often, but it is the first time I've been on the receiving end. I never would have thought I'd enjoy it so much, but as black spots trickle into my vision, I know that if I had any breath left in my lungs, I'd be moaning like hell right now.

Just as I'm about to pass out, Yulian lets go and pulls away, leaving me gasping for air. As I finally come back to my senses, my first thought is: *fuck, I can't wait until next time so I can do the same thing to him with my chain*, and my second is *next time?*

We both take a few seconds to find our breath and I can't help but stare at him. His eyes remain dark and lustful, while his neck is now covered in dark red marks left by my mouth. He grins at me as he notices the way I'm observing him.

"Should've known how much you'd enjoy my hand wrapped around your neck," he smirks.

"Fuck off, who said I did?" I deny.

"You did," he replies, gesturing to my crouch where my clearly hardening cock is. I ignore him, tucking myself back in as he does the same, and all goes quiet.

I'm still catching my breath when the silence starts to feel dangerous. Not awkward or charged, just heavy. It weighs on my ribs in a way that the afterglow can't explain. There's a shift, subtle at first, like my mind is sobering faster than my body can follow. The adrenaline that

once coursed through me is ebbing, and in its place comes something colder. Regret, maybe. Or shame. Or just the clarity of what I've just done.

He doesn't know. I thought I was getting revenge, that I was justified. When I invited him here, I never expected this to happen, I swore he would never have me like that again, but then he told me the truth, and it was like all previous plans just disappeared from my brain. He doesn't know that everything he gave me, every moan and bruise and fuck-you laced between our teeth, was stolen under false pretences.

I thought he was still the version of him I could hate without consequence.

And now I know better.

It burns. It fucking burns.

The guilt coils low in my gut, spreading like poison. It's such an unfamiliar emotion to me. Growing up as I did, I was taught to never feel ashamed of my actions. I'm Vaughn Morozov, son of Kirill Morozov and future Parkhan and my decisions should never be questioned. But now, as I look at Yulian's face, glowing slightly with the sweat we just created, I know I need to say something. I know he deserves it. If there's even the slightest chance this wasn't all a game to him, he deserves the truth. Even if it's ugly. Even if it rips everything else apart.

I take a breath. Step forward. Try to quiet the chaos in my head long enough to force the words out.

He glances at me, eyes steady but unreadable. Waiting.

“Yulian…” He stands slowly, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. There’s still heat clinging to my skin, but the adrenaline has drained from my chest, leaving a hollowed space in its wake.

Yulian doesn’t speak, just watches me with eyes that are still sharp but not cruel. His lips are swollen and smeared with drying blood, his hair a mess, his breathing slow. I stare at him, and for once, I don’t know what to say.

So, I just do.

“I have to tell you something,” I say quietly.

His brow lifts, just a little, as the corner of his mouth lifts up. “That sounds promising.”

“I mean it,” I murmur, throat suddenly dry. “I... fucked up.”

His mouth drops again as he tilts his head, the beginnings of something curious, or guarded, starts to show on his face. But before I can open my mouth again, his phone vibrates on the floor where it must’ve fallen during the fight. The sound is muffled but insistent, dragging both of our gazes toward it.

He bends to pick it up without looking at me and answers with that casual drawl he always uses, like nothing touches him.

“Yeah?”

There's a pause. Just one breath. And then his posture shifts.

He straightens slowly. The casual tilt of his head disappears. His expression tightens. His jaw goes rigid.

I can't hear a word of the voice on the other end, but I don't need to. I can see it in the way his eyes go cold. In the way his mouth parts slightly, then closes again. In the way he flinches, just once, as though the voice has struck something raw. It's so rare that the great Yulian Dimitriev would let something get to him, let alone show it. And now emotion that I barely even recognise floods through me.

"Are you sure?" he says finally, his voice no longer careless but clipped. Controlled. He doesn't speak again for a long moment, just listens. And I watch the storm gather behind his eyes.

I feel it before he even ends the call.

The realization.

When he finally hangs up, the silence is deafening. He doesn't look at me right away. He just stares at the wall like he's trying to burn a hole through it.

Then he turns his head. Slowly.

"So this was all just a distraction, huh?"

I can't look him in the eye and it's as pathetic as it sounds.

He laughs, once. It's not real laughter, it's sharp and hollow and furious. He throws the phone down hard onto the table behind me, where it bounces and clatters and slides to the edge but doesn't fall. I don't flinch, I'm too well trained to, but it's a close call.

"Want to guess who that was?" he asks. "Or, well, I suppose you already have a good idea."

I don't answer.

He steps closer. The space between us feels like it's filled with broken glass now.

"Mikhail," he says, his tone brittle with control. "Telling me the Heathens just stormed the Serpents' mansion. Blew through every room like a fucking invasion. And I wasn't there. Because you kept me here."

He gestures to the room, to the floor, to us.

"Because you fucked me to keep me distracted."

I open my mouth, but nothing comes out. There's no version of the truth that doesn't make this worse.

"It wasn't supposed to be like this," I manage, though it sounds pathetic even to my own ears. "It wasn't supposed to-"

“What?” he snaps. “Wasn’t supposed to work? Wasn’t supposed to mean anything?”

He steps in close now, too close, and I brace myself. But he doesn’t touch me.

“You know the only reason this worked is because I trusted you. I thought after all these weeks of us finally talking, of what felt like you finally letting me in would mean that I could finally put just a little bit of faith in you.”

I want to tell him that I truly didn’t mean for this to happen. That, when I invited him here, us doing the things we just did was in no way part of the plan. That we were just supposed to fight, physically, until I knew it was done, and I could see his reaction. But now that I have seen it, I get none of the satisfaction that I expected.

I thought he was still screwing other people, still playing games, still the same monster I convinced myself he was. I want to tell him it all, but the words don’t come. And even if they did, what is the point? Because none of it matters now. Not when I made the decision to do this. To keep him here. To use him.

“You really thought I was with Kayden?” he asks, voice quieter now, but more cutting for it. “That I was out there fucking someone else while texting you every night?”

“I saw the way he looked at you,” I say, “in the photos,” the excuse sounds pathetic and hollow.

He scoffs, rolling his eyes dramatically. “The photos.” He nods his

head to himself, like he can't actually believe it. "And you decided that meant I was screwing him? So, you punished me. You held me here. You let them hit my friend and my home when I wasn't there to stop it."

He pulls back slightly, blinking like he can't believe the words even as he says them.

"I should be there," he murmurs. "And I'm here. Because of you."

The silence stretches long. And heavy.

His fists curl tightly, almost white, at his sides. I can see the fingers flexing and I'm almost sure he is going to swing at me. But he doesn't.

When he finally speaks again, his voice is flat.

"I'm done here."

And then he walks away.

-

I sit in my office, staring at the glow of my phone screen like it might blink back to life on its own. The room is too still, as if the silence has thickened, wrapping itself around the furniture and clinging to my skin. Nothing moves, not even the air. My jacket lies crumpled on the floor where I dropped it hours ago, and the mug of coffee on the desk has long gone cold. The only sound is the faint hum of the ceiling light

above me, and the slow, traitorous beat of my heart.

I scroll up through the messages again, even though I already know what they say. I sent them all over the last two days since Yulian left.

Vaughn:

Where are you?

Vaughn:

Please just talk to me.

Vaughn:

I swear I didn't think it would happen like that when I invited you. I just got caught up in the moment.

Vaughn:

You have every right to be angry.

Vaughn:

I know I fucked up but just let me explain.

Vaughn:

Please.

Beneath the final one, in dull grey letters, sits the verdict: *Not Delivered.*

I stare at it until my eyes burn. I try to send another message, even

though I already know it won't go through.

Vaughn**:**

Even if it's to say you hate me. Just say something.

Not Delivered.

The two words hit harder than anything he could have said. At least anger means he's thinking about me. At least a threat means he still sees me. This, silence and absence, is so much worse.

It's deliberate, calculated. Final.

He's shut the door. No more answers. No more games. No more us.

I lean back in my chair, one hand dragging across my face. The leather creaks under me. Everything feels stale, like the air hasn't shifted in hours. I should get up. Do something. Clean the mess I left behind or call someone who can pretend to care. But I don't move.

I think about his face, when he turned to me after that phone call, when he said, *So this was just a distraction, huh?* I think about the way his voice cracked, how his expression folded in on itself like someone had kicked the air out of him. I'd seen him bruised and bleeding. I'd seen him laugh through broken ribs. But I had never seen him look like that.

And I caused it.

I used him. I exploited the one thread of trust that still tied us together and pulled it until it snapped. And the worst part? I did it because I thought he deserved it. I did it because I believed I had the right to.

I press the heel of my hand to my forehead and close my eyes, trying to breathe around the weight in my chest.

If I had just asked him, if I had stopped and asked, he would have told me. But I didn't want the truth. I wanted justification. I wanted to be angry. I wanted to believe I was still the one being hurt. He's hurt me before and I was so convinced he would do it again, so I believed it.

Instead, I became the one doing the hurting.

My phone screen dims, then goes black. I don't touch it. I just sit there in the dark.

And all I can think is: *He blocked me.*

Not because he hates me, but because he trusted me. And I broke that trust.

Sighing, I swipe out of my messages and instead click on a different app that might actually have someone that can take my mind off of things.

QUIETRAGE:

How is it going with your man?

I text Gareth, who is in fact TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS on reddit. I figured that out pretty quick and I wouldn't be surprised if he has figured out the same. He's a pretty smart dude. However, despite knowing each other in real life, I think the comfort of the assumed anonymity and being able to talk about our shared problems with our identity crises has really helped the both of us.

Gareth has his own man that he's having all sorts of issues with. I don't know who it is exactly, but I can only assume he is on the island with Gareth. However, things seem to be looking up between them lately. And after my clusterfuck of a week with my own 'relationship' or whatever you wanted to call it, I think I sort of need to hear that my friend is at least doing better than me.

He doesn't take long to reply.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

He's not MY man. I still dislike him sometimes, but apparently, that's when I'm sex deprived because it takes being fucked into exhaustion for me to fold.

If you had told me a year ago that golden-boy-Gareth would be saying this, I'd have laughed in your face. But now, I'm just proud that at least one of us is coming to terms with who he is and what he likes. There's no shame in it, I know, but I have a hell of a lot more expectations of me than Gareth does.

QUIETRAGE:

BWAHAHA we've come a long way from 'I'd never get fucked' to 'I'm being fucked to exhaustion.'

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

Don't push it, man.

QUIETRAGE:

Hey, I'm just glad you're having fun, my dude.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

You're not? Having fun, I mean?

I hesitate before answering.

Gareth and his man, whoever he may be, and whatever Gareth may think, can make it work if he is willing to try. The only expectations placed on his head is to be as good a lawyer as his father and grandfather. Sure, it may come as a shock, but when he does come out, I have no doubt everyone will be super supportive.

But me?

I sit here in the low light of my office, elbows on my knees, hands clasped together like I'm praying to something that's already given up on me. There's a strange calm that comes with the finality of it, like standing still after treading water for too long. The ache hasn't faded, but it's quieter now, duller around the edges. Like grief settling in where rage used to be.

And beneath that, something colder: reason.

Because what was I expecting, really? That he'd forgive me? That he'd come back? That we'd somehow rewrite everything we are into

something softer, something survivable? There's no version of this where we get to want each other without consequence. There never was.

He's chaos, and I'm supposed to be control. He's fire, and I've been taught to be stone. I was raised to inherit something ruthless, something brutal, something that doesn't leave room for feeling. Love, if it ever existed in this world, was always meant to be sacrificed for duty.

And Yulian, he doesn't fit into that. He never did. He's a flaw in the design. A crack in the armor I've spent years forging. And every time I let him near, I remember what it feels like to bleed through it. We're supposed to be sworn enemies. Hell, we are sworn enemies.

I know, deep down, that my father would support me. He has always been my biggest supporter, and I know how hard he fought to be with my mother. But I also know how hard he had to work to become Pakhan in the first place. The respect he had to build, the things he sacrificed. When I take his place, I need to maintain his legacy. And whether I'm in the 21st century or not, I can't do that being with a man. The people we work with, the high-ranking members of the Bratva that still have strong influence, they'd see him as a weakness. And maybe they'd be right. Because when I'm with him, I lose myself. I forget the lines. I forget the mission. I forget what I'm supposed to be.

So maybe this is what I deserve. To be left. To be cut off. To sit here and rot in the choices I made. I thought there was a chance I could have both, I thought I could punish him and still hold onto the part of him that belonged to me. But I can't.

There's no future for us. There never was. And the more I wanted one, the worse I made everything.

He’s gone. And maybe that’s exactly how it’s supposed to be.

QUIETRAGE:

I never will.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you enjoyed that chapter! warning: i have never written smut before, so please be nice haha.
tbh, i didnt love this chapter when i reread it once it was done but im not rlly sure what about it, but maybe im just not fully back into the swing of it after being away for so long. hopefully you liked it more than i did.
i did put both of them through the ringer this chapter so sorry to them lol, but im pretty sure you guys love the angst so i hoped you enjoyed it.
im trying to get at least one chapter out a week so it shouldnt be too long until the next so ill see you guys then :).
also: i know im not always great at replying to them all, but i really do see every comment on every chapter that you guys do and i really am so grateful for the kind and loving words. the support means so much and just seeing someone comment about how much they are enjoying this totally makes my day, so i cant thank you enough for them. the fact that im still getting comments now telling me how much they are enjoying this two months after the last chapter has definitely helped motivate me to continue after being away so long.
thanks again <3

Chapter Twelve

Chapter Notes

hello! i hope everyone is well and thanks again for the kind comments on the last chapter :).
this is literally like insane but i was scrolling through the yulian tag on tumblr like yesterday (i do it like every couple days, im obsessed) and i literally came across someone talking about my work??? it felt like breaking the fourth wall. i cant remember who it was or what they said but im pretty sure it was very kind so if your reading this, thanks so much.
i also had planned to make a google form thing after this story is finished for any requests/ideas for other fics, but i figured id just give you guys my tumblr (the same name as this, lucsf19) and i have ask me anything on so feel free to ask any questions about this fic whether its about my thought process over writing it, why i wrote things certain way or anything like that. i wont give anything that might be spoilers away though, so no asking for future stuff. also feel free to send requests/ideas for future fics whether they are one shots or long term, obvs i wont be able to write them yet as im focusing on this but ill totally save them for the future.
enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Vaughn

-

The basement feels quieter tonight.

No footsteps overhead. No shouting. Just the low hum of the lightbulb above me, flickering every few seconds like it's got a secret to tell. I sit in my usual spot, back pressed to the cold wall, bruises still aching from the last visit Anatoly paid me. My ribs burn when I breathe too deep, and the skin around my wrists is raw and red from too many days of rope.

But I feel brave tonight. Because I know I'm getting out.

He told me, last night, when he came down. He told me that tonight was the night, he had it all planned out. He's going to help me leave. And I believe him.

Still, there's something else crawling up my throat, something that tastes suspiciously like guilt. Because I'll be leaving him behind.

I try to tell myself I still hate him. I remind myself of that every hour, every breath. He's the son of the man who did this to me. The boy who watched my first beating like it was a performance, then snuck down here with food and stupid questions and eyes too wide for someone raised in this kind of house.

He's strange, morally bankrupt and utterly obsessed with me. But I can't even be mad, because I think I'm just as obsessed back.

Despite the strong façade I have kept throughout this kidnapping, I truly believe he is the only reason I've managed to stay sane down here. And part of me, a part that I despise, doesn't want to walk out that door if it means never seeing him again.

The door clicks at the top of the stairs. My heart spikes, but not from fear. Not this time. I hear the door creak open, and I hear the careful, quiet steps of someone who's learned to move like a ghost.

Yulian.

He rounds the corner and meets my eyes. His expression is sharper than usual, but not cold. Determined. Nervous. Hopeful.

“Get up,” he says, his voice low but urgent. “We don’t have long.”

Adrenaline floods my body. My hands shake as I stagger to my feet, every bruise complaining in protest. He moves toward me and, without ceremony, cuts the ropes. The frayed cords fall to the floor with a soft thud. I rub my wrists, wincing.

Yulian reaches into his oversized hoodie and pulls out a knife, small, silver, probably stolen, and presses it into my palm. “Just in case,” he says. Then pulls out a wad of crumpled notes. “And this’ll get you far enough. The first phone you can get your hands on; you make the call. Now come on.”

He turns and walks towards the stairs with a hurry; however, he turns back toward me when he notices I’m not following. “What are you waiting for? We need to go.”

I stare at the cash in my hand. My mouth gapes as I try, just for a moment, to fight the words that desperately want out. In the end, I lose my internal battle. “Come with me,” I plead.

He breathes deeply and he looks so incredibly conflicted. “Vaughn…” he whispers. “I can’t.”

“Please,” I beg.

“Vaughn.”

“My parents will take you in. If I ask them. Mafia leaders or not, they are good people, and they will if I ask. Just come with me and we can stay together. Everything we have done together, these last few weeks? We can have a lifetime of it. Just come with me. Please.” My voice cracks and I feel so pathetic, but the idea of leaving him behind makes my whole-body ache.

Yulian doesn’t answer at first, but I can see him fighting with himself. He closes his eyes for a moment, before finally responding.

“I won’t leave my sister behind,” he says.

I let out a broken laugh. “She can come too. I’m sure my parents would love a daughter.”

His eyes go wide like that was the last thing on Earth he was expecting me to say, but I don’t regret it one bit. I’m not lying, I truly believe my parents would love a little girl. But I also know that there is nothing in the world I wouldn’t agree to that ensures he comes with me.

After a few moments of staring at me, he finally says “okay.”

I feel pure elation erupt within me, before he adds “but not yet.”

“Why?”

He sighs. “We don’t have time. She is asleep upstairs still. I don’t have any of our things, I need to talk to her first, so she understands, she is so young still, Vaughn.”

I want to argue, but I know I can't. He has every right to be thinking this way. "Then when?" I ask.

"Soon," he replies. "When my father realises, you're gone, there will be chaos. We can sneak out in the middle of it."

He looks around for a moment before darting toward the stacks of boxes on the other side of the room. Reaching around one of them, he grabs the pen and notepad we keep stashed there to keep track of our board games.

He strides back toward me and thrusts them into my hands. "Here, right down your address and headquarters address, so we can find our way to you. I'll go to whichever is easiest."

I don't even hesitate, scribbling down both address' and ripping the paper off the pad and handing it to him. He stuffs the paper into the pocket of his hoodie. We look at one another for a moment before nodding. He grabs my hand, pulling me along.

We creep up the basement stairs, silent as ghosts. I follow his lead, gripping the knife in my hand even though I know it won't do shit against real firepower. Yulian doesn't hesitate, just glides through the hallway like he owns it.

We reach the back of the house. The door is just ahead; freedom is ten feet away.

I can hear my own heartbeat as we reach it.

Yulian glances back at me and nods once. Then he opens the door.

I barely have time to register the cold air before I see them.

His father, in the centre with guards lined up like soldiers around him. All of them armed are armed and waiting.

-

Present Day

Vaughn

-

It's been three weeks since he walked out that door, and I still see him every time I close my eyes.

Three weeks. Twenty-one days. Five hundred and four agonising hours, not that I've been counting. Not that I've needed to. He's in everything. The silence in the morning when I don't check my phone because I know there's nothing there. The Russian shows that play on my TV that he was obsessed with. Every time I look at the stars.

He's gone, but he's everywhere.

I told myself it would fade. That if I buried myself in work, in strategy, in everything I'm supposed to care about, I'd stop hearing his voice in the back of my head. But nothing fades. Nothing dulls. I can't stop thinking about the last time I saw him, how he looked at me like I was nothing. Like I was just another enemy.

I used to think hate from Yulian was better than indifference. That if he still hated me, it meant he still cared. But silence… silence is worse. Silence is a grave.

I don't even check for message receipts anymore. I already know what I'll see. *Not Delivered.* Always. It's been that way since the night I blew everything to hell, since the night I realised I had made a mistake so irreversible, even someone like Yulian wouldn't come back from it.

So, I've been clinging to what little I have left. I reread our messages every day, hanging on to the hearts he sent that I never returned.

My phone buzzes beside me and I don't even have to look to know who it is.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

So, you were kind of right. It's not only sexual. I don't think it ever was tbh.

Well, duh. Hearing Gareth suffering with his new relationship has kind of been the only thing keeping me going. While we have yet to acknowledge that we know each other in real life (and I doubt we will anytime soon), I have been enjoying his company every day. Though, from his current message, it seems like I may now be the only one in this boat.

QUIETRAGE:

I KNEW it haha you're in looove.

Jealous as I may be, I can't lie and say I'm not happy for my friend. He's had a pretty rough go of it lately with his man, so at least one of

us might end up happy.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

STFU I'm not in love. Anyway, I kind of want to take care of him. Is that a thing in gay relationships?

I don't know why he thinks I would know the answer to this, I'm pretty sure we established that we are about as clueless as each other in this.

QUIETRAGE:

I don't see why it shouldn't be. But you're barking up the wrong tree. Never had a gay relationship.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

I don't want to treat him like a girl. I think that would be offensive of something?

QUIETRAGE:

Not sure it it'd be offensive, bro. Just do what feels right.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

Have you had dates with your guy yet?

Yeah, so, I may not have given Gareth the full story about what has happened between Yulian and I the last few weeks. Namely, the fact that absolutely nothing has happened because he blocked me.

QUIETRAGE:

He's not my goddamn guy and I don't want to see his fucking face.

(Lie.)

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:
Getting pissy, are we?

QUIETRAGE:
Just don't bring him up today, okay? I'm getting a headache.

Speaking with Gareth is supposed to be my escape, not my reality check.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

Okay. What did you use to do with your girlfriend? My real serious one left way too soon and I was a teen.

Great. So, we have moved on from my situationship that I ruined and now has me blocked even though I can't stop thinking about him, to my ex who I was with for years and cheated on me then killed herself. I just can't get a break today, huh?

QUIETRAGE:

She loved movies, so we did that.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

We can't do anything in public. That's so unhelpful.

QUIETRAGE:

Then maybe you should come out in public. Have you talked about a relationship or something?

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

We HAVE to talk about that?

How is this man almost twenty-two years old?

QUIETRAGE:

Uh, kind of? Jeez, you're like a fetus on the emotional side?

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

But why? We're already together.

QUIETRAGE:

As fuck buddies. That's different from a relationship, my dude.

TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS:

But I already told you it's not only about the sex.

QUIETRAGE:

Telling me is cool and all, but you kind of have to tell HIM. Talk about it and all that jazz. Jesus. Get a grip, man. Even I have more emotional awareness than you. The bar is in hell.

And that's saying something, considering how bad I fucked up a couple weeks ago.

But as I type out the message, I can't help the shame crawling inside of me. If I had just talked to Yulian like I'm telling Gareth to speak to his man, I probably wouldn't be feeling like this right now.

I should have taken my own advice. I should have talked to him. Trusted him.

But I didn't.

And now I don't even have the chance to try.

-

Yulian

-

I think it's been twenty-three days, but I stopped keeping count after the first two weeks because even I could recognise how pathetic that made me. The kind of pathetic that sits in the dark rereading old messages just to see his name lit up on the screen, knowing there won't be a new one. The kind of pathetic that spends hours staring at myself shirtless in the mirror to remind myself of the one piece of Vaughn I still have left, scarred across my chest.

I blocked him. I know I did. I remember dragging my finger across the screen and hitting the button and telling myself it was power. That it was control. That if I shut the door, I wouldn't have to hear the knock

I couldn't bring myself to answer. But now? Now it just feels like silence. Like I carved the part of my day where he used to be and left it hollow.

Which is fucking stupid.

Because I'm supposed to be past this. Past him. I'm supposed to be angry, and I am, I swear I am. Because yes, it hurt that he used me like a weapon against myself. That he kissed me like it mattered and fucked me like it didn't. But the part I can't get past, the part that still burns in the back of my throat, is the fact that while he was in my mouth, his men were storming my home.

My home.

That mansion wasn't just stone and ego and money. It was mine. My territory. My people. Sure, I rule over them with an iron fist and those that failed to fully defend this place have been punished, but I spent my entire childhood watching my father treat his men like nothing but toys and pawns, and I won't be the same. My people are under my protection.

But because I was too busy being pulled into Vaughn Morozov gravity, I was too stupid to realise what was happening.

And maybe I could forgive the betrayal of the body. Maybe I could convince myself that the heat between us was too dangerous for either of us to think straight. Maybe I could rationalise the lies, the manipulation, the distractions. But I can't forgive blood on my floor. I can't forgive the look in Mikhail's eyes when he said they were outnumbered and caught off-guard. That's my failure. Not Vaughn's.

Mine.

And let's not forget the rage my father showed when he found out. Mikhail was still with him when it happened, so he had no choice but to inform my father of it. So, I've been trying to fix it.

For the last two weeks, I've been waking up before noon. Wearing the shirts my father prefers, pressed and proper, like the ridiculous collar and gold cufflinks somehow make me more suitable for leadership. All in spite of the fact that he's not even here.

But I'm doing it. I'm trying. Because if I do this right, if I play the role just long enough, my father won't have any reason to say no when I ask him to let Tati join me after Christmas. That's the goal. If I keep everything clean and quiet and controlled until then, she can finally be where she belongs. Where she can be herself and be happy.

That should be enough. That should keep me focused. But it doesn't.

Because I still think about him.

I still remember the sound he made when I touched him. The way his voice cracked. The way he didn't answer when I accused him of caring. And the worst part? I think he did. I think he still does.

I lie to myself a lot. It's one of my most refined talents. But I can't lie about that. Not when I still have the messages.

I pull them up sometimes. Not often. Only… nightly.

Just to read over the things he said when he wasn't being an heir, or a

liar, or a coward. Just to remember the way it felt when he was mine, even for a few stolen seconds. He was wrong to do what he did. I know that. I'm not stupid. But I was wrong too. I let myself want something dangerous and then punished him for being exactly that.

And still, the worst part is how much I miss him.

How much I want him anyway.

-

The house is humming. Not particularly loud or chaotic. Just... alive in the way I've trained it to be when I need to remember that I'm still here. When I need to feel the presence of people orbiting around me, laughter layered over tension, music bleeding softly into the background like a heartbeat I don't have to own. It isn't a party in the way I used to throw them before I decided that it was time to start acting 'responsible'. This is quieter and controlled, but still scratches the surface of what I crave. Movement, proximity and especially distraction.

I try to tell myself this is what progress looks like. That I'm finding better ways to be loud. That I'm taking responsibility. But I know what it really is: survival. It's the way I patch over the grief. Over guilt. Over the fact that even now, even after all this time, my mind keeps circling back to the one face I shouldn't be thinking about.

I can't stop thinking about him.

So I descend the stairs with my usual slow confidence, the kind that makes people part without realising they've done it. I'm wearing something clean and expensive, dark grey with deep green silk at the cuffs, tailored to a point that borders on excessive, but everything I do

is a little excessive. I am still Yulian Dimitriev, after all. The air is warm, thick with perfume and low laughter, and I let it settle over my shoulders like a second skin.

I let my eyes skim the room, cataloguing familiar faces, allies and strays alike. People I know well enough to nod to, people I know well enough to watch. Mikhail is stationed near the far end of the room, half-leaning against the sideboard with that expression he wears when he's pretending, he isn't annoyed by everything he sees. He flicks a glance toward me, then away again, as if that was all the confirmation he needed.

After landing on me, his gaze switches back to the other side of the room, and upon following his eyeline, I see why.

Annie.

She's laughing at something someone said, a glass of something amber and expensive held in her fingers like she owns the entire room by default. She's dressed in something silky and crimson, form-fitting but elegant, the kind of thing that turns heads without even trying. And it doesn't surprise me. Annie has always known how to take up space, confident in a way that demands respect rather than indulgence, the kind of beauty that gets sharper the longer you look.

She fits here far too well, and Mikhail hates that.

I know he's been keeping an eye on her, and not the flattering kind. He thinks she's dangerous; not in the obvious, gun-tucked-in-your-thigh kind of way, but in the quiet, calculating sense. He thinks she's here for something, and he's not wrong. Annie's always made it clear she wants to work for me, or someone like me, or better yet, *be me*.

But, unlike my grumpy friend over here, I know how to have a little fun, no matter how much my mind may be storming with thoughts of a certain fellow mafia heir. And besides, Annie was a great help during the initiation, so I think Mikhail just needs to stop being so jealous that I have other friends. He should know he'll always be my number one BFF.

Anyway, ignoring Mikhail's glare, I cross the room slowly, letting the crowd fold and unfold around me, and approach her without needing to make an announcement. She sees me coming, her gaze lifting and holding mine like she expected it. Like she'd already made room for me in her evening.

"Yulian," she says by way of greeting, her voice smooth, amused, and unaffected, the edges tinged with that lazy confidence she wears like perfume.

"Annie," I reply, offering a half-smile as I take the space beside her, not too close, but close enough that I can study her features without drawing suspicion. "I'm starting to think you enjoy these little evenings more than you let on."

She raises an eyebrow. "Are you accusing me of being social?"

"God forbid."

She chuckles and takes a sip of her drink, the movement smooth and unhurried. There's a deliberate quality to everything she does, like each gesture has been measured but not rehearsed, organic but always intentional. I watch her for a moment longer than I should, and she doesn't blink.

She never does.

“You look tired,” she says eventually, and I can’t decide if it’s an insult or quiet concern.

“I’m trying something new,” I reply. “It’s called being responsible. Comes with sleepless nights and far too many emails.”

“Ah, yes. The slow, painful death of personal freedom.”

“Mikhail’s thrilled.”

“I can imagine.”

We lapse into a quiet pause. Around us, the party continues, a hum of background energy neither of us needs to acknowledge. I let my gaze drift over her again, the line of her collarbone, the shape of her mouth, not because I’m trying to seduce her, but because I’m trying to remember what it feels like to want something that doesn’t burn when you touch it.

So I lean in a little, just enough to suggest something that isn’t quite harmless. “You know, you’re very good at pretending you don’t enjoy the attention.”

She glances sideways at me, eyes sharp but glittering, as a sly grin spreads across her face. “Who says I don’t enjoy the attention?”

“Touché.”

She tilts her head slightly, studying me with a gaze that feels too knowing. “Are you flirting with me, Mr Dimitriev?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Well, decide quickly. I’m not fond of ambiguity.”

There’s a challenge there, light but unmistakable, and for a moment I think I might just lean into it. Let her take my mind off things. Let her fill the space Vaughn still haunts. But when I reach for the next line, the next smile, the next carefully placed hand, she moves first.

She steps back.

“Look,” she says, her voice lower now, not unkind but firm. “You’re not bad at this. And you know I always like to have my bit of fun. But I don’t mix business with pleasure.”

I blink. Not out of offense. Out of surprise.

Most people, most women, most men, most of the interchangeable bodies that float through this house, wouldn’t ever say that to me. Not when there’s something to gain. Most people here want something, whether its power, a higher position, money, anything. And they know damn well that sleeping with the boss is a pretty easy way to reach their goal, and so they’d take no issue with climbing into bed with me for it.

But she does.

“I’m not here to sleep my way into a job,” she continues. “I’m here because I want to work with the best. And I want to earn it. Properly.”

And the way she says it, so steady, so certain, forces me to reassess her again, to peel back another layer I hadn’t noticed. Because I believe her, and I believe she means it.

I step back, just enough to give her space, and nod once.

“Very well,” I say quietly.

“Good.”

She gives me a small smile then, one that doesn’t mock or belittle, but simply acknowledges the line we won’t cross. And without waiting for me to say anything else, she turns and disappears into the crowd, her crimson dress cutting through the sea of bodies like a flame refusing to be snuffed.

I watch her go. Not because I want her. But because she reminded me what real strength looks like. And maybe, for the first time in a while, I needed that more than I needed to be touched. The thought of Vaughn creeps back in, like it always does, uninvited and impossible to push away. But it feels different tonight, less like a wound, more like a scar.

And maybe that means I’m healing. Maybe it means that, at least for tonight, I might be able to take my mind away from him and his life and his everything for the first time in weeks.

Until of course one of his fellow Heathens comes storming through the

front door.

-

By the time I find myself beside Mikhail again, the evening has begun to slide into that comfortable lull where people stop pretending to be interesting and start leaning on walls and each other like gravity is heavier than usual. The conversations have blurred at the edges, laughter lower now, slurred in some corners, conspiratorial in others. The wine has started to flow more freely, and so has the smoke, curling lazy trails above the dimmed chandelier light as the crowd thins slightly.

Mikhail, as always, stands like a wall, unmoving, unreadable, arms folded like he's holding up the architecture with his posture alone. He hasn't said much tonight, I think he too blames himself a little for not being here when Nikolai raided the mansion. Still, I can tell by the tilt of his head, the twitch of muscle at the corner of his jaw, that he's unimpressed with the company I've invited into our home.

I open my mouth to say something sarcastic, something that might unstick the tension between us, when the doors explode open with such violence it nearly yanks itself off the hinges.

The room stills. Instantly. Like breath has been sucked out of every mouth at once. And then the shouting begins.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS HE?"

The voice is familiar, though I haven't heard it in a while. Killian Carson. It's been a while since I've been in the ring and I'm pretty sure he's been avoiding it more often than not due to his new girlfriend he's supposedly obsessed with.

While I'm always up for a bit of chaos, he sounds moments from burning the whole house down.

He storms in like a bullet with teeth, gun drawn, eyes wild. My guards, to their credit, are on him in seconds, flanking him on both sides, weapons raised, tension electrifying the air.

"WHERE IS HE?!" he bellows again, shoving one guard aside with a brute force that sends the man staggering. "Did you take him? Is he here? Do you know where the fuck he is?"

Guests recoil, some stepping back behind furniture, others too drunk to process what's happening. Someone screams faintly from the corridor. The music cuts off mid-track, the silence it leaves behind even sharper than the chaos.

I raise one hand.

"Well, this is interesting." I say, loud but calm.

Mikhail moves to my side immediately, already between me and Killian with that barely concealed readiness he always carries when a room turns hostile. Annie, who had been speaking to someone near the fireplace, edges closer, standing just to my left. Her eyes flick to mine, wide but focused, asking without words what I want her to do.

I shake my head.

She doesn't move. Good.

One of the guards beside Killian, younger and overeager, takes a step forward and mutters,

“Should we put him down?”

“No,” I snap, quick and sharper than I intend. Then, softer, but firm: “No one shoots him.”

Not because I care about Killian. Not because I owe him anything. But because I know what would happen if Vaughn heard I let his friend bleed out on my floor. Because even with all the space between us, even with everything he did, and everything I did worse, I still think of him when it matters.

“Carson,” I say now, stepping forward just enough that I become the centre of the room again. “What the hell are you talking about?”

He’s panting, shaking slightly, eyes scanning the room like he expects someone to emerge from behind a curtain somehow. His jaw clenches and unclenches, fingers tightening around the gun in his hand.

“Gareth,” he spits, voice cracking. “Is missing. So, I’m here to ask you, face to face, if you had anything to do with it.”

Fuck. I don’t know much about the elder Carson brother. He has never been one to fight, much more of a ‘golden-boy’, or so I’ve heard.

But what I do know about him, is that he is the member that Vaughn is the closest to. He didn’t speak about them much to me during the time we kept in regular contact, but from the small bits I did get, I could tell it was Gareth he considered his best friend. For a moment I

wonder why Killian is here, rather than Vaughn in the form of a text or call, but then I remember.

He can't.

Don't get me wrong, I still hate the rest of the Heathens very much and would like nothing more than to beat the shit out of all of them (as I have many times before), but if I were to pick any of them, it wouldn't be Gareth.

And while I don't have a brother, I do have a sister. So, even though I know what a psychopath Killian Carson is, I can tell by the limited emotions on his face that as much rage as he is currently feelings, there is a small amount of worry in there too. I'd do anything to get my sister back if she were taken, so I do understand where Carson is coming from.

Not that I'd ever admit that, of course.

Especially not right now, when Carson seems so unhinged. In fact, I don't think I've ever seen him in so little control. I'm contemplating what I should answer, hopefully in a way that will calm him down just a little, when he moves so quickly, I don't realise what has happened until it has.

In one swift motion, Killian turns and grabs Annie, yanking her toward him with one arm and raising the gun to her temple with the other. She doesn't scream. Doesn't flinch. Her hands lift slowly in a show of control, and her eyes flick back to me, now not asking, but daring.

The guards lose it. Guns raise instantly. The only person who doesn't look quite so bothered is Mikhail. Otherwise, the entire room is

frozen, one breath away from catastrophe.

“Put the gun down,” I say, low and cold.

“Not until I get answers!” Killian barks. “If one of you motherfuckers took him, if this is another twisted game-“

“This isn’t a game,” I snap. “And I didn’t take your brother.”

He glares at me. He doesn’t believe me. But he studies my face the way someone studies weather before a storm, and slowly, after a long, agonising pause, he lowers the gun.

Then he shoves Annie roughly to the side. She stumbles but catches herself, barely even blinking, and steps behind Mikhail with the self-control of someone who’s learned not to show fear unless it benefits her.

“I needed to be sure,” Killian mutters, voice shaking without an ounce of guilt in it. I’m pretty sure he isn’t capable of that particular emotion.

“Then be sure,” I say, stepping forward again, slowly now. “Because if you ever point a gun at someone in my house again, I won’t stop my guards from putting a bullet in your head next time, regardless of who you are.”

He stares at me. Finally, he speaks again.

“You might want to repeat this conversation back to a certain mutual friend of ours. Well, my friend, I don’t really know what he is to you these days.”

My blood runs cold. How did he know about me and Vaughn? Could Vaughn have told him or the other Heathens?

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Don’t play dumb. I don’t know what the fuck has been going on between you two lately, but he seems to think you might have had something to do with it.”

My mouth drops open slightly. He really thinks that?

I grit my teeth. “I’ll let him know. Now get the fuck out of my house before I let my guards have some shooting practice.”

Carson doesn’t even smirk, he simply turns and walks straight out, while everyone else stares at us in confusion, probably not understanding why I would just let him go.

I think for a moment, considering what to do next, when I finally make a decision. “Party’s over, everyone.” I hear a few groans and mumbles but also whispers and suspicious glances. Well, I can’t have anyone doubting my ruthlessness. I have a reputation to uphold, after all.

“What?” I say sarcastically, “I have a Heathen to track down, didn’t you hear?” This at least gets a few chuckles.

“But on a serious note, if you do spot Carson, please let me know ASAP, it’s been so long since I’ve been able to beat up one of those pricks.”

This seems to finally put everyone at ease, and they begin filing out. Other than Mikhail, of course, who stares at me suspiciously. He waits until we are alone, however, before finally speaking.

“Well, what has exactly been going on between you lately?”

Always blunt, that one.

Nevertheless, I ignore his question. “I have him blocked right now. I need you to get me a phone I can call him from. Now.”

There is a moments hesitation, likely the side of him that considers me his friend. However, the other side of him, that recognises me as his boss and future Pakhan, wins, as he turns and walks toward his office.

He takes less than a minute, coming out with a new phone. I would have asked Mikhail directly to use his phone, but I know he wouldn’t want Vaughn to have his number. He slaps the phone into my palm, and I don’t hesitate, immediately dialling the number.

“Got it recognised, huh?” Mikhail comments, noting how I typed the number by memory. I hadn’t even thought about it and don’t know what to respond with.

I settle on “leave. This is a private conversation.”

Mikhail scoffs, but does as he is told, leaving me alone in the room, just as the call clicks, signalling that Vaughn has picked up. He starts speaking immediately.

“Look, whoever this is, I don’t have time right now, I’m dealing with something important-“

“Hi Vaugh,” I cut him off.

Instantly, “Yulian,” slips out breathlessly, like he is having to convince himself it is actually me. All is quiet for a few moments as we seemingly take one another in. I almost think we are about to have a civil conversation, but this is us, so the small drink I head earlier must be getting to my head more than I thought.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Vaughn spits it out with such fury and venom it actually takes me aback. I had been expecting it, sure, but even the expectation didn’t quite hold up to the reality. It’s certainly not the first time I’ve been on the receiving end of his anger, but it is the first time in response to such a close friend of his being potentially hurt.

Before I have the chance to say anything, he continues.

“I know I fucked up, okay? I do. But you have no fucking right to take it out on my friends. Gareth has never even gotten in the damn ring with you. If you want to punish me, if you want revenge, you come straight to me. Not to him. I opened up to you about my friendship with him and *this* is what you do with it? He’s my best friend, Yulian. And no matter what I may still feel for you, if you have hurt him in

any way, I will personally hunt you down and-“

“What you still feel for me?” I cut him off with a smirk quirking at my lips.

He goes quiet for a moment as if he has just realised what he said. I know I should be avoiding this topic, as it wasn’t why I called, but I can’t help myself. Just like for him, no matter what happened, I’ll still always feel for him.

“Like I said, it doesn’t matter because if you took him-“ Vaughn ignores my interruption after a deep breath.

However, I choose to interrupt again because as much as I’m enjoying hearing him proclaim his feelings for me, I can hear the subtle worry in his voice, along with the very not-subtle anger. “I didn’t take Gareth.”

This makes Vaughn go quiet again, as if he hadn’t even considered this a possibility. “What?” he finally says.

“I didn’t take Gareth,” I repeat, “I didn’t take him, I haven’t hurt him. I didn’t even know he was missing, didn’t know any of it until about ten minutes ago when his younger brother stormed my mansion while I was in the middle of a party and threatened to kill everyone if we didn’t reveal where I had stashed his brother. Which, again, I didn’t do, by the way.”

“Oh,” is the only reply I receive at first, then “well, then, I-uh, my bad then.”

I scoff and shake my head in frustration. “You know what, Vaughn, this is your problem. You constantly assume the worse in me. In every situation. You never trust me. You never believe me. We are an endless cycle of me trying to prove my loyalty to you and you refusing it every single time!"

I hear a similar scoff on the other side of the line. "Oh, please," Vaughn bites, “you know exactly why I can’t trust you. You betrayed me-“

“You know, I’m pretty fucking fed up of that bullshit, too. You go on and on about this great betrayal, yet I still have no clue what the fuck you are talking about! I know I didn’t always do things right when we were kids, but does it really warrant eight years of this bullshit?”

“You are unbelievable,” Vaughn grits, “you know exactly what I’m talking about. Don’t play fucking dumb because you don’t want to take accountability because you’ve realised now that I’ll never be able to full trust you because of it. You are pathetic and ridiculous and-“

“*Enough*!” I finally shout, and to his credit, Vaughn finally shuts up.

We both breathe heavily for a few moments as I try to get my thoughts in order. I’m not usually known to be the mature one, or the well-spoken one, especially between the two of us, but in this situation, with this context, I think I have to.

I breath out one last long breath. “Are you okay?”

There is silence for a moment. “What?”

“Are you okay?” I repeat again.

“Why?” he asks. And no matter what has transpired between us, I want nothing more than to be by his side right now.

“Because I really did hang onto every word you sent when we were texting. I know that Carson is your best friend, and I know you are probably not doing so great right now with him gone and you have no clue where he is or how to help him. And while I hate that you are taking your anger out on me right now, I understand. So, I’m asking you, are you okay?”

He hesitates to answer, and I can imagine his mouth gaping like a fish, trying to find the right words to say. “No, I’m not,” he finally settles on. “And I’m sorry for how I just spoke to you. And for before, at the warehouse, when I hit you. I just-“

He sounds like he struggles to get the words out.

“I just get so angry sometimes,” he eventually says.

I close my eyes, breathing deeply. “It’s okay. I’m not mad. Your friend is missing, and you are hurting. So, it’s okay, Vaughn.”

“You haven’t called me Mishka once,” Vaughn says, and I can’t quite pinpoint the emotion in his tone.

I open and close my mouth a few times, trying to figure out what to reply. Eventually, I choose to ignore him altogether.

“I have to go, Vaughn. I promise I will keep an eye out for Carson, and I’ll have others doing the same. If I get even a slight idea, I’ll let you know immediately-“

“So, you’ll unblock me?” the hopefulness in his voice physically pains me to shut down.

“No.”

His breath hitches on the other end, like he wasn’t expecting me to say that.

“You’re right, Vaughn, you do get angry sometimes. But that doesn’t make it okay. I’m fed up of being your punching bag, chasing you around constantly and getting nothing in return other than stolen moments of passion you end up regretting. I’m not taking this thing between us off the table completely, but I think I need to learn how to exist without you, at least a little.”

“But-“ Vaughn tries to beg, but I don’t let him.

“Goodbye Vaughn.”

I hang up the phone and immediately power it off completely, so I can’t see him trying to call me back or sending more messages.

That honestly might have been the most mature I’ve ever been. Which isn’t saying much, to be fair, but it’s something.

Since I was ten years old, I feel like I've existed solely for Vaughn. I've watched him and waited for him, doing anything and everything I thought I had to for him. But now that he has pushed me too far, now that I've realised, I have other responsibilities outside of Vaughn Morozov, I know I can't let us keep on like this, not right now, anyway, when I need to gain my father's respect back and ensure my sisters safety to the island.

So, for now at least, I need to stay away.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you guys enjoyed that. i quite liked how this chap came out, in terms of both flashback and the actual story. definitely more than the last chap.
i hope you dont mind that i gave them 'feelings' as opposed to the usual rk men who are just straight psychopath.
once again, my tumblr is lucsf19 if anyone is interested in asking for more in depth stuff about the story so far or has requests for future fics.
have a great day :).

Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

> hi! hope you all have been well. i know it has been a few days and tbh this chapter was someone of a struggle to write (the flashback was super easy, the present day was not). i think that im just struggling with having to write within the constraints of cannon, i definitely think itll be easier for me once i have moved past the end of KTV and everything can move at my own pace.
> i have a lot to say and a lot of thoughts about what i wrote this chapter, as well as some explanation as to why, but ill put them at the end so no spoilers. feel free to read and ask questions if you like, or dont, thats okay too
> enjoy! <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Vaughn

-

They're all here.

Dozens of them, too many to count in that first stunned second, all black coats and gloved hands and sharp, cruel expressions that look more like masks than faces. At the centre of it all stands Yulian's father, still and silent, as if he's been waiting for this moment the entire time.

How did he know?

The world narrows in an instant, the air thick and frozen, and before I can move or speak or even react, Yulian does something that makes my chest

twist so sharply I feel it in my spine, he steps in front of me.

It's subtle. A shift. A movement so slight it could be mistaken for coincidence, but I know it's not. He's shielding me. Standing between me and the man who made him.

Yulian doesn't look at me. Doesn't say anything. But his stance is clear, rigid, protective, wrong in all the right ways. His father's eyes flick briefly over us like we're nothing but dust on his boots, not even worth the time it would take to speak our names.

"Take him back to the basement," he says, voice like gravel and ice, thick with bored contempt as he casually nods his head toward me. "I need a word with my son."

Just like that.

No acknowledgment. No questions. No anger, even, just cold instruction. The guards move forward, quick and practiced, and I don't have time to fight. One of them grabs my arm with bruising force, the other presses something hard against my back. I look to Yulian, I don't know what for, there is nothing either of us can do, but he still hasn't moved, hasn't said a word, hasn't even blinked.

I look at him, really look, and what I see guts me more than anything else ever could.

He's frozen.

Not afraid. Not exactly. More like… paralyzed. Like something inside him has snapped or disconnected, and all that's left is the shell of a boy who

tried, who almost got away with something good, and is now watching the price being written in real time.

He doesn't stop them. He doesn't look away either.

The guards drag me through the corridors like I'm something rotting, something dangerous, and I don't speak. I don't scream or struggle, even as my shoulder smashes into a wall, even as my legs trip on the edge of the stairwell. The door to the basement opens ahead of me like a mouth, and I'm thrown inside with less ceremony than garbage. The lock clicks shut behind me.

And then I'm alone again.

The dark is thicker now, colder somehow, as if the walls have learned how to mock me. I press my back against the far wall, fists clenched so tight my nails dig into my palms, the sting almost enough to keep me grounded. Almost. My heart is still racing like it's trying to run without me, and I can't stop the thoughts from spiralling.

What is he doing to Yulian right now?

The question haunts me more than the silence. More than the concrete. More than the bruises beginning to bloom along my arms. Because I've come to know that man, know his smile, know the casual cruelty in his eyes, know how he makes punishment feel like a lesson and pain feel like an inheritance. I imagine Yulian's face, blank, bleeding, shut down, just like mine has been, and the images won't stop coming. I try to breathe through them. I fail.

He helped me. He tried. And now he's going to suffer for it.

It's my fault. It's my fucking fault.

I sit there in the dark with guilt wrapped around my throat, every second dragging like a blade across my skin. The silence is unbearable, and yet I dread the moment it breaks. I don't know what I want, for someone to come or for everyone to stay the hell away.

Thirty minutes pass. Maybe more. Time here doesn't obey the same rules. I've been in this basement too many times to pretend it's just another room now. It's a cage. A grave with no dirt.

Then, finally, I hear it. Footsteps. Slow. Heavy.

The door creaks open. I shoot to my feet, heart in my throat, breath caught somewhere just behind my teeth. Please be him. Please not be him. Please-

Light spills down the stairs in a sliver. A shadow moves. And I brace for whatever's about to come next.

And it's him. Yulian's father.

My stomach twists into something sharp and ugly. My fists clench reflexively at my sides; breath caught somewhere between my lungs and my throat. He descends the stairs like he owns the air around him, one foot after another, calm, methodical, unhurried, the kind of walk that says nothing down here can touch me. *The shadows cling to him, almost reverent, the dim bulb overhead flickering faintly as if it, too, is afraid of what he might do.*

But it's not his presence that turns my blood to ice.

It's the blood and bruises decorating his knuckles.

It stains the skin in crusted patches, dark and vivid, like red ink drying over bone. The sight of it unravels something inside me so fast it almost knocks me back against the wall.

"What did you do to him?" I demand, the words cracking out of me before I can stop them. My voice is raw, louder than I intend, desperate and unsteady, because he *hasn't come through that door, and I know exactly what this man is capable of. I've felt it so many times since I was taken here, and the idea of it happening to Yulian-*

Yulian. God, Yulian.

Did he try to fight back? Did he stay down in hopes it would be over quicker? Did he-

But the man laughs. Low and quiet, like I'm amusing. Like my panic is a joke that barely deserves the air it was breathed into.

"You think this is from Yulian?" he says, lifting his hand slightly, turning it as if admiring the mess smeared across his skin. "Please. I'd never lay a hand on my own son."

He chuckles again, darker now, as he crosses the final few steps into the middle of the room, and the dim light shines directly above him, highlighting the man that haunts my nightmares yet fathered my dreams.

"I beat one of my guards," he says casually. "Bastard mouthed off. I don't tolerate disrespect." He pulls a handkerchief from his pocket and lazily wipes his bloody hand on it like it's just another day at the office. "Yulian,

on the other hand, has done very well."

I blink. "What?"

Genuine confusion floods me.

He glances at me, amused again, tilting his head slightly. "For getting the information, of course. That's why we're here, isn't it? To celebrate a job well done."

The words don't make sense at first. They hit like water on glass, no cracks, no breaks, just a surface tension too thick to understand.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I ask, as my heart begins to hammer harder now, thudding like footsteps up a stairwell I don't want to climb.

"Don't play dumb, Vaughn," he says, tone sharpening just enough to sting. "You know exactly what information I mean."

He reaches into his coat pocket and pulls something out, a folded, creased slip of paper. And when he holds it up between two fingers, the world stops.

No.

That can't-

No.

My breath shudders out of me as I stare at it. I recognize the handwriting. My handwriting. I remember the ink smudging slightly at the bottom. The corners damp from where my hands were sweating from the nerves, in spite of the freezing temperatures down here. It's that paper.

The paper.

The one I gave Yulian. Just a few hours ago.

The one with my family's and our main headquarters address- everything my father has ever told me to guard like it was carved from my own ribs.

"Where did you get that?" I whisper, though I already know.

He smiles. That cruel, knowing smile that stretches just enough to show teeth. "From Yulian, of course."

"No." I shake my head, taking a step back even though the wall is already pressed against my spine. "No. You're lying. He wouldn't- he wouldn't do that."

"God, you really are stupid," he says, voice thick with disgust. "What do you think this was, a fairy tale? That my son just happened to stumble into the basement one night and decide to make a friend? You didn't really think I didn't know he was down here, did you?"

I can't breathe.

“You didn’t really think all those nights, all that time, that none of it reached me? In my own home? That I didn’t send him down here? That I didn’t instruct him exactly what to say, when to say it, how to get you to open up like a pathetic little child that you are?”

“No,” I whisper again, eyes burning. “You’re lying. He didn’t, Yulian wouldn’t, he was trying to help me-”

“He was doing his job,” the man snaps. “He’s, my son. He does what I tell him to do. And he did it well. Played you like a goddamn fiddle. And you sang for him, didn’t you? Every night. Every tear. Every secret. Like you couldn’t wait to let him in.”

“You’re lying,” I say, louder this time, but my voice cracks, and I hate myself for it. My next words come out shouting, “that blood is from him. You beat him like you beat me! You took that paper against his will, he would never have given it to you willingly. Never.”

He doesn’t respond immediately. Instead, he pulls his phone out of his pocket, taps something, and holds it up.

And then I hear it.

“Here, right down your address and headquarters address, so we can find our way to you. I’ll go to whichever is easiest.”

Yulian’s voice.

My chest caves in.

The audio is crystal clear. No static. No distance. No muffling. The mic had to have been right there, inches from us. Maybe on him. Was it always on him?

The man smiles as the audio plays, then pauses it with a single finger.

“You still think I forced the paper out of him?” he asks. “You still think he didn’t know?”

“I-you-maybe-maybe you bugged him, he didn’t know. I know he didn’t know.” My voice cracks over and over again and I know I’m lying to myself, but it’s like I can’t bring myself to accept what I’m hearing. My mind seems to shatter as it fights hard to keep out the information it desperately needs to not be real.

But it is real. And it causes an ache so deep in my chest I feel like I’m dying. Like I want to die.

“Really?” he says, eyebrows raised. “You think he never noticed? A microphone on him every night, hidden in the same place, the same weight, the same routine? Every time he walked down here, told you secrets, sat close, got you to feel something, and he never noticed?”

He taps the phone again.

"I’m going to help you escape.”

“Too late. You’re stuck with me forever.”

“I used to sneak out of my room all the time. Back home.”

“I have a cousin my age. She’s like a sister to me.”

“How long are you going to stay here?”

“No game. I just wanted to meet you.”

“You’re Vaughn.”

More clips. More conversations. Every night. Every whisper, every dream I dared speak out loud. My voice. His voice. My pain. His comfort.

All of it fake.

I feel sick.

“And you know what the best part is?” he says, drawing closer. “You gave it willingly. All that loyalty. All that emotion. For nothing. Because the addresses- that was always the goal. Why do you think you’ve been here so long? Surely you would know there is no amount of money your father isn’t willing to pay. A ransom was never on the cards.”

I sink to the floor, my legs unable to hold me. The room sways violently, and I press my palms to the concrete to keep from vomiting.

“He was never on your side,” he adds, almost gently. “He was mine. He is *mine.”*

My heart has cracked wide open. I can feel it. Like shattered glass, each piece buried in my ribs, pressing from the inside out. I want to scream. I want to believe it's a lie. I want to tell myself this is just one more trick, that Yulian is upstairs, bruised and broken, that he's coming down here any second to explain, to say he had to, to say he didn't mean it.

But there's nothing to hold onto anymore. No air. No reason. No goddamn hope.

I crave his presence more than anything else is the world right now, even after his existence has eternally altered my own in such a way that I know I'll never recover. I'll never move on. It feels like he has entrenched himself within me, captured my mind and soul with a darkness that engulfs them.

I have never shared a connection with anyone like I have with him. And I never will again.

I briefly register the fist flying before it lands, but I do not feel it. A dull explosion of pain to the side of my face, but it feels like I'm acknowledging the pain, realising it is there, but I'm not able to feel it. My head snaps sideways. Blood bursts against my tongue.

Then another. And another.

I barely register the blows. My brain is too loud. My chest too raw. The only thing I can hear, louder than the punches, louder than the ringing in my ears, is his voice. Not the fathers.

Yulian's.

I picture his eyes and the hint of sadism in them that I felt drawn to as they reflected my own. Sadism that I now recognise as a sign that I ignored time and time again. I believed him.

I curl inward, not to protect myself, but because I can't stay upright anymore. I can't be in this body, in this moment. I want out. I want out.

The hits keep coming. My ribs. My stomach. My jaw. The man's voice, somewhere above me, taunting, spitting more words like poison, stupid, pathetic, naive, played like a child, nothing, nothing, nothing*, but it doesn't reach me.*

Because none of it matters.

Not the pain. Not the blood. Not the fear.

What matters is that he lied. He lied.

His betrayal cuts me so deep it feels like an actual, raw, gaping wound inside my chest. I struggle to get air in and it's not because of the beating.

He touched my hand and smiled and listened and looked at me like I was seen, like I was something worth saving. And it was all just theatre. Just strategy. Just cruelty wrapped in silk.

And worse, I gave it to him.

I gave him everything. My words. My faith. My heart.

And now my family is at risk. My father. My mother. My family. My people. All because I trusted him.

But even that's not what breaks me.

Because the guilt of what I may have damned my family to with that slip of paper overwhelms me. It wraps around my brain and the blame for what I have done will surround me for the rest of my life, however long it may be.

But while the guilt may overwhelm me, the need, the desire, the desperation, for him to be by my side, in spite of everything he has done, consumes me whole.

My hatred for him in this moment devours my mind, but my heart longs for the only comfort I have had in this nightmare I have existed in. My heart, that longs, even still, for this to all be a lie.

I still want him.

And that is the worst betrayal of all.

-

Present Day

Vaughn

-

True to his word, Yulian hasn't spoken to me again. And while part of

me understands why he ended the call the way he did, part of me also hates him for it. For having the strength, I don't, to walk away first.

And yet, I haven't tried to reach him.

Not because I couldn't. I could, if I wanted to. I still have people, resources, connections, strings I could pull with one phone call and no explanation. There are back channels and workarounds and all the methods that come with being who I am, but I haven't used any of them. Because I don't know if I should.

Because that last conversation felt too much like an ending.

The only good thing to happen these past few weeks is that Gareth is safe now. As it turns out, he got caught up in a mess with his mystery man and it put him in a lot of danger. He was kidnapped and tortured, but I know he is strong, and he will get past it.

The thing I hadn't been expecting, however, is the identity of said mystery man that was finally revealed. I still get angry with myself when I think about it.

Fucking Kayden Lockwood.

Yeah. That Kayden.

Or, should I say, Kayden Davenport, as it turns out. All that rage and jealousy I showed over a man that has been obsessed with my best friend since the start. I read all those messages from TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS about the very man I had grown to hate, completely unaware.

And now, after I've ruined whatever Yulian and I might have had over it, I just feel pathetic.

So, I've been doing some thinking lately. Even though I initially decided to go to Kings U after Christmas, I've decided not to anymore. He doesn't want to see me for a while and frankly, I don't think it's entirely healthy if we do. We can never move on from one another while in such close proximity. Hell, we have been an ocean apart these last few months and it's still been a struggle to not think about him.

I haven't told my parents yet. They still think I'm transferring, that I've got some grand plan for moving across an ocean and starting fresh and taking back control. I've been waiting for the right moment to tell them, but the truth is I've just been waiting to feel brave enough to answer their inevitable questions.

Because they don't know about Yulian.

They don't know that when I close my eyes at night, I still see the shape of his smirk. They don't know that my ribs ache when I think of him because I gave him too much of myself. They don't know that I'm scared I'll never stop obsessing over him, even when I hate him.

The thoughts don't let up. The ifs. The maybes. The aching fucking silence of what we never said, what we should have said, rather than screaming and fucking and whatever else we did to distract ourselves from how complicated we are whenever we are together.

-

I knock twice before entering, not because I need permission, the most my father would give me is a stern glare, but because it feels like the right thing to do. Like I need to announce myself before stepping into a space that doesn't yet belong to me, even if it technically will someday.

My father's office is large but uncluttered, masculine without being severe, all dark mahogany and low lighting. The windows are wide but shaded, drawing long shadows across the floor, and the air smells faintly of leather and aged scotch.

He's at his desk when I step in, as always, reading something that looks important, in that vague way all mafia paperwork does. Logistics. Schedules. Shipments. Names of men who might not be alive tomorrow.

My mother came to my room just a few moments ago, informing me that dad wanted to see me in his office. Office chats usually mean that its business related.

He doesn't look up. "You've been quiet lately."

"It's just been a long few weeks." He can't argue against that, what with Gareth's kidnapping. Plus, I really don't want him to, ignoring the fact that he is my Pakhan, as my father, he has always been great at reading me.

"Sit."

I do, though I feel a spark of nerve rise in me, he must have something quite serious to discuss with me. There's a beat of silence, heavy and deliberate, before he speaks.

“I’d like you to fly out to the island. Just for a day or two.”

The words are casual, like he’s asking me to pick up dry cleaning, but something in my stomach tightens. I keep my face neutral.

“The island?”

He nods, finally lifting his eyes to mine. Calm, unreadable. “Like you said, it’s been a long few weeks. In fact, it’s been a long few months, what with it seeming like every member we have over there has managed to fall in love before even finishing their first semester.”

He says ‘fall in love’ with a sarcastic tone, which I find a little ironic, considering how obsessed he is with my mother.

“I’m just a tad concerned with everything going on over there with so many changes in such a short time. Gareth has yet to return there, so I imagine things will be a little on edge. Also…” he trails off as if he can’t fully decide if he should continue.

“I’d like you to do a small recon on the Serpents,” he finally says. That makes my jaw drop a little, but not because I worry, he suspects anything between Yulian and I.

Since the kidnapping, he has always done his best to keep me away from the Chicago Bratva and anyone associated with it. While I was encouraged to engage with the Japanese and Italian mafia, as well as other branches of the Bratva within the US, I was kept strictly apart from Yulian’s corner of our world.

Every time I've visited for an initiation, my father has asked I stay away from the Serpents. It's never been an order, per say, but he made it clear he would much prefer I avoided any contact with them. He would never admit it, but I think my kidnapping had a fairly significant impact on him.

"The Serpents?" I ask, my voice a little choked from the shock.

Despite his initial confliction, he continues with a strong and sure voice. "Yes. You an adult now and it's important you know how to deal with all enemies, regardless of your history. You don't need to interact with any of them at all, just observe and find out any information and report back."

Oh, if only he knew just how much history there really is.

I consider straight up saying no, but I know it'll bring too many questions, so I try something more subtle. "I talk to the other Heathens frequently and trust their judgement. I see no reason to be suspicious of them. Have them do it."

He crosses his arms over his chest. "I also have no suspicion of them. I'm not sending you to spy or catch anyone out, just to simply check in. The Serpents, however, I am certainly suspicious of. This trip need only stay between us and your mother."

I exhale through my nose, force myself to nod like it makes sense, like I'm not already sick at the thought of setting foot on UK soil again, of breathing the same air as *him*. "I just-" I hesitate, then recover, "I don't think I'm the best choice for this. There's nothing wrong with my judgment, I just don't think it's the best use of time."

"Is there a reason you're so reluctant to go?"

The question is too sharp, too direct, and I feel it like a blade under the ribs. My instinct is to lie, but lying to my father is like lighting a match in a locked room, it always ends badly, especially because he is certain to know.

It's not that I don't want to see him. Of course I do. But in the last week or so that we have been apart, I've come to understand his decision more and more. I'm starting to realise that he's right, we should stay away from each other.

Nonetheless, my father doesn't know about that, or anything. And I'm not ready for that to change.

"No," I say, and I almost believe it. "You're right, it's good to keep an eye on things. I'll go."

-

It's only been a few hours since I landed, and already the island feels like a skin I need to shed. It's familiar in its details, the layout, the weather, the smell of salt and sunbaked stone, and yet every corner holds too much memory, too much weight. I've caught myself gazing into the woods where Yulian and I shared our first kiss more time than I care to admit.

The air here is thicker than I remember, humid with tension, as if even the breeze knows I shouldn't be here. I've kept to the shadows since I arrived, observing without participating, slipping through the edges of campus and around the mansion like a ghost with nothing to haunt but his own regrets.

I've spent most of those hours watching Jeremy and Nikolai as Gareth and Killian are still in the states. They don't know I'm here, and I don't intend to change that unless absolutely necessary. From what I've seen, they're mostly the same, though there's a quiet shift I can't quite ignore, a dullness at the edges of their energy. The campus used to pulse with our presence, magnetic and chaotic, but now something's muted, as if the music's still playing but someone turned the volume down.

There's a slowness to their laughter, fewer sparks of reckless spontaneity. It's not grief, not quite, but it's something close. The absence of Gareth especially casts a longer shadow than I think anyone would admit. I've watched as they frequently check their phones with somewhat anxious expressions, as even though Gareth is now safe and sound, we all know whatever he is involved in isn't over yet.

Still, there are moments of lightness, like when I spotted Nikolai curled up beside Brandon in a local café, his fingers laced tightly through the other boy's. At first, I thought he was holding hands with Landon King, and I couldn't help but think *what a plot twist*, but I quickly realised it's his supposed 'nice' twin. While I have seen Landon before as he somehow seems to match Killian on the psychopath scale, I've never managed to catch his identical twin.

The guys have all been telling me that this Brandon has apparently 'tamed' our Niko, which I highly doubted due to it being impossible, until I saw the way Nikolai looks at him. There was a softness to him that I didn't recognize, something open and unguarded, like a storm that's finally found its eye.

Brandon leaned in occasionally, murmuring things I couldn't hear, and Niko laughed, real laughter, the kind that doesn't end in a smirk or a sharp elbow jab.

It's strange, seeing them like this, my friends, my people, through the

lens of distance. Like I've pressed my face to the glass of a life I crave, but can never have. There's a pull in my chest I try not to name, and I move on before it can settle.

Jeremy, of course, is the one I focus on most. My father didn't say it outright, but I know why I'm here, Jeremy would've been at the top of his mental checklist. The de facto leader in my absence, calm where Niko was chaos, steel where Killian was fire. Jeremy has always had a way of holding the group together without drawing attention to the way he does it- subtle, methodical, always watching.

Prior to meeting TOOPRETTYFORTHISMESS, he was always my go-to if I wanted to talk, as, being the oldest, he has taken on somewhat of an older brother role to the rest of us. Not to mention, aside from Gareth who I honestly thought was a little boring back then, he was the only was I trusted to keep a level-head.

I spot him with Cecily through a downstairs window in the mansion- her laughter spilled through into the breeze; her arm linked through his in a way that looked natural, not performative. She tilted her her head as he spoke, listening intently, eyes locked onto his like nothing else exists, and Jeremy… he looks softer than I'm used to seeing him. Not weak, never weak, but quieter. At peace, maybe. He kissed her temple at one point, and she squeezed his hand.

Immediately, as his childhood friend, I know I approve of this girl. Plus, as his future Pakhan, I certainly approve after the background check I did and discovered how rich and powerful her family is. And even if she didn't have that sort of family history, it wouldn't matter, because even judging from just the way he talks about her to us, I know he is in deep.

Watching my friends, I feel a spark of what I can only describe as jealousy rise within me. I can never have that, not with the person who I truly want it with. I'm not even going to be on the same continent as him, let alone the other thousands of things standing in

our way.

I let myself breathe for a moment, tucked into the forest behind the mansion, hidden by the trees and the bushes. I watch them laugh, touch, love, and I feel it all like a bruise forming beneath the skin.

As I'm finishing my observation of the Heathens, I know my last task. What I have to do next. *Who* I have to see next.

It's time to see the Serpents.

-

The sun has long since dropped below the horizon, leaving the island draped in dark shadows and scattered points of gold from the mansion windows, flickering like temptations I'm meant to resist. I'm crouched low on the edge of the forest line, half-concealed by overgrowth and thick summer air, just close enough to see the Serpents' mansion in all its decadent, smug glory.

From this vantage point, the building looks like a stage. I've been watching for over an hour, maybe more. Time here feels warped, stretched thin by the quiet thrum of bass spilling out into the night and the occasional ripple of laughter cutting through the trees.

The party is in full swing now, I can see figures slipping through open doors and onto the back patio, drinks in hand, bodies swaying as if they don't know or don't care for the danger they stand so close to. I've counted at least six people I recognize from the Serpent's inner circle, and while I wish I could say they are smug bastards with more money than loyalty, I know Yulian would only allow the most devoted to get close to him.

Earlier, I heard someone on the phone just a few paces from where I'm hiding — a heated conversation, low and rushed, about a shipment coming in from Lake Michigan, somewhere near the south of Chicago. There were names I didn't recognize, references to ports and timing, and a veiled urgency beneath the surface that told me this wasn't just about party favours or club supplies. This was real. The kind of real my father would want documented, dissected, and handled.

There was also talk about an upcoming party- or better yet, several of them. Apparently, with both the Elites and Heathens too busy being in love to throw parties like they used to, this place is all the rage now if you want to attend the best parties on the island. I made mental notes of every detail. I *was* doing what I was sent here to do.

And then I saw *him*.

It takes too long, longer than it should, as I scan the thick crowd through the window, but eventually, through the haze of music and movement, Yulian appears like a goddamn vision from a fever dream, striding through the living room to take a seat on one of the chairs like it's a throne, carrying that infuriating elegance he's never had to work for.

He's in all black, of course, shirt sleeves rolled just enough to show the veins in his forearms, the top few buttons undone like he's daring the world to try and touch him. And next to him- *her*.

She's beautiful in a way that feels offensive, like something carved with the sole purpose of inciting jealousy. Long, dark hair, glowing skin, lips that move too confidently. She's not draped over him, and if I had any rational mind when it came to him, I'd recognise that there is no evidence of flirting on either of their faces, but she's *close*, too close, and he's giving her his full attention with the kind of expression he used to save for me.

My blood goes hot, quick and searing, a pulse of violence low in my gut. Rage boils within me. I want to go in there and rip her away from him, scream in her face just for having the audacity to exist beside him like she belongs there. I want to drag him through the woods by the collar of his shirt, slam him into the nearest tree, and demand to know who the hell she is and why she gets to stand beside him when I was told to stay away.

But I don't.

Because I can't.

Because this is *not* that kind of visit.

I remind myself, over and over, that I am not here for him, that I am not here for *us*, that this is about information and discretion and maintaining the illusion that I've moved on, that he means less than nothing to me now. I tell myself it's working. I tell myself I'm in control.

But the longer I watch him, laughing, leaning slightly toward her, fingers brushing the edge of his drink while hers ghost along the back of the chair, the tighter my fists clench, the harder it becomes to breathe. And then he says something that makes her laugh, really laugh, head thrown back slightly, hair catching the light, and Yulian smiles. Not that fake, cruel smirk he uses when he wants to unnerve someone. A real smile. The one I used to think only I got to see.

And that's it.

That's the fucking end of my patience.

Before I can stop myself, I'm moving, keeping low, cutting across the side of the house through a patch of darkness that hugs the outer wall. I know this mansion too well, know the security blind spots, the weaknesses in the old construction, the loose panel under the gutter that gives just enough of a foothold if you know where to press.

I climb, silent and sharp, until I reach the window I know is his, top floor, third from the left. This isn't the first time I've done this.

I slip inside without a sound, landing lightly on the hardwood floor, my breath shallow and my heart in my throat. The room smells like him, something dark and clean, expensive and laced with sin, and it knocks the wind out of me for a second longer than it should.

I allow myself to be thrown back to the first time I was in this room and the things that happened in it. I'd be lying if I said I hadn't daydreamed about the scar that must sit across his chest. I haven't been able to see it since I put it there, but tonight, I think I might change that.

I don't let myself sit. I don't move toward the bed. I just wait, in the dark, by the window, eyes fixed on the door like a predator lying in wait.

I tell myself I'm only here to talk. I tell myself I need closure.

But every lie I feed myself tastes sweeter than the last.

And when I think about the way he looked at that girl earlier, I know, I'm absolutely sure, that if he walks through that door with her on his arm, she won't even have time to scream before I'll snap her neck.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed that.
firstly, ill start with the flashback. i loved how it came out. obviously, everything has been leading up to it and we finally get the big reveal of the betrayal that vaughn has been talking about. hopefully the reveal was done justice with all the build up i had for it. i honeslty think it came out so well in terms of how i pictured it and it was so fun to write. it feels so good when i just kinda 'flow'. there is only one more flashback, next chapter, then there will be no more. obviously, there will be more info and talks about what happened back then, but it will be the end of the actual flashbacks. i hope you guys liked it as much as i did lol.
so, now the actual chapter. tbh, i didnt love it. i didnt really want to write them reuniting, at least not so soon, as i wanted a bit more build up before their next meet and i think it would be healthier and more in character if they stayed away for a while. however, i kind of backed myself into a corner as timeline wise, this is where the phone call between gareth and vaughn in KTV takes place where gareth hears 'rustling' in the background as vaughn has to leave the room to take the call. i think we all know why and there is a sneak peak of what is going to happen next chapter. but anyway, i needed a reason for them to be together, even though i didnt want them to be lol. it definitely made it harder to write because everything i was writing kind of felt out of character if u know what i mean? obviously i tried my best, but i just couldnt fully get on board with vaughn seeing him again, so i tried my best to make the reason they meet again make sense and it not be entirely because vaughn just decided to go to yulian again after being told to stay away. i hope that makes sense and no one is massively disappointed that there isnt more personal growth before another meet up, but i promise there will be much more.
like i said at the beginning, i think once i get past KTV timeline and i can be on my own timeline, it will be much more enjoyable for me to write.
if you have read this far, thank you. my tumblr is lucsf19, if you guys have any other questions or want to hear me yap even more because i promise i could write an essay about my writing choices haha.
as always, i hope you enjoyed and thanks for the support :) <3

Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Notes

> hii guys. i said on my tumblr i would upload this latest monday evening and it is currently 00:15 on tuesday, but i havent slept yet so i think it counts.
> im exhausted so not much text today!
> enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Eight Years Ago

Yulian

-

It's been a week since I opened that door and the world collapsed.

Seven days since I reached for freedom and failed.

Seven days since I watched my father standing at the threshold of the escape route like a god waiting to strike, his guards lining the garden behind him like black-clad statues of judgment, weapons slung casually across their bodies like they wouldn't hesitate to shatter bone.

Seven days since I stepped in front of Vaughn, thinking it would mean something, thinking I could protect him, only to watch him get ripped away again.

And then the punishment came.

I've spent most of the week in bed. Not by choice. My father made sure I

couldn't move properly, made sure every step reminded me of what happens to traitors in his house, even the ones born from his blood. He didn't touch my face, he's too vain for that, too concerned with appearances, but everything else… it's a mess. I can feel every breath in my ribs. My back lights up when I twist the wrong way. My thighs and arms are painted in livid bruises, some so deep the skin looks black beneath the surface. The hoodie and sweats I wear hide it all, and that's how he wants it, wounds tucked neatly out of sight, evidence of control maintained.

Luckily, I found the piece of paper with all of Vaughns addresses still tucked away in my jumper once I woke up from my beating. I didn't hesitate to burn it. It doesn't even matter to me anymore if I can get out and go with him. All that matters is that he gets out.

But I'm not thinking about my father anymore. Not anymore.

I'm thinking about Vaughn.

I've been thinking about him every second since that night. Since I failed him. Since I watched him get dragged down those stairs like a prisoner of war while I stood there, stunned, silent, useless. I thought I could get him out. I really thought I could do it. I had the key. The map. The timing. I thought I'd accounted for everything.

But I forgot one thing.

My father is always three moves ahead.

I still don't even know how he knew.

And now Vaughn is still down there. Alone. Shackled. Probably thinking

about how pathetic and useless I am, how I failed him. And I did.

But I have to speak to him.

I have to tell him I'm sorry.

That I tried my hardest. And that this isn't over yet.

But the basement's guarded now. Always. There's a man stationed at the door twenty-four hours a day. A rotation of unremarkable faces, but I've been watching them. Tracking shifts. Observing.

I've noticed something.

The 2am switch is always ten minutes late. The incoming guard smokes first. He thinks no one sees him, a lazy indulgence, a weakness in the schedule. He's always late. A man who, when I rule over this empire, I would have killed before I allow such incompetence under my judgement.

Ten minutes is all I need.

So tonight, I move. Quiet, slow, every step deliberate. My body protests with every motion, but pain is nothing new. Pain is part of my bloodstream now, and Vaughn is worth it. Always has been.

The house is asleep. The guard is gone. The basement door creaks open.

The darkness swallows me like it's hungry. The stairs groan beneath my

weight, and every step makes my spine scream, but I push through it. I press forward into the dark because he's down here. He has to be. He's all I can think about. All I can feel.

I reach the bottom. And there he is. Chained to the wall, completely still.

His head is bowed, long hair falling forward, arms slack at his sides. I don't know if he's sleeping, dissociating, or dead, and the panic that spikes in my chest is so sharp I nearly choke on it.

"Vaughn?" I whisper.

No response.

I take a step closer. The air is heavy with cold, concrete dust, and something worse, something like sweat and blood and the sharp bite of fear long since dried on stone.

"Vaughn," I say again, a little louder.

Still nothing.

I crouch carefully, wincing as my knees ache. "Mishka, it's me. Yulian."

Then, slowly, too slowly, he lifts his head.

His eyes are open. Glassy. Unreadable. There's no warmth in them. No recognition. Just that detached emptiness people get when they've been kept

in a cage too long and stopped counting the days.

“I came to talk to you,” I say. “To explain.”

His eyes shift, not toward me but past me, through me, like I’m just another shadow in the dark.

I swallow hard.

“I’m sorry,” I say. “I didn’t mean for it to happen like that. I tried to get you out. I tried-”

“Get the fuck out.”

The words land like a bullet. Cold, hollow and final.

I blink, stunned. “What?”

“Get. The fuck. Out.” he spits, and his voice has teeth now. Fire and hatred erupts like a storm breaking through glass, sudden and violent.

I flinch, but don’t move.

“I came to apologise,” I try again, quieter this time.

“Apologise?” He laughs, but it’s not a laugh. It’s a bark, a sound made of broken things. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

And then he lunges.

The chains pull him back, metal shrieking against the bolts, and he snarls like something feral, arms straining, body writhing. The sound he makes isn't human. It's pain, rage, betrayal, everything I feared it would be.

I stumble back a step.

If the basement weren't soundproof, the whole house would be awake by now. He's screaming. Cursing. Clawing at the distance between us like he wants to tear me apart with his bare hands.

"You fucking liar!" he shouts. "You son of a bitch! You used me! You- you tricked me!"

"No, I didn't-Vaughn, I didn't-"

"I hate you!" he screams. "I hate you with everything in me. I hate you more than I've ever hated anyone! Even your father doesn't come close!"

I freeze.

The words hit like a whip, raw and burning. I've seen him angry before, short-tempered, prideful, combative, but this? This is pure, undiluted, rage.

And I don't know how to respond, because it's not the kind of hatred you argue against. It's the kind you earn.

He's panting now, pulled tight against the wall, teeth bared, wrists red where the chains bit into them. His body is trembling with the effort of trying to reach me. My heart is a slow, sick thud in my chest.

"I didn't mean for it to happen," I say, but the words sound weak even to me. "I swear to you, I tried. I tried to save you-"

"Shut the fuck up!" he shouts. "Don't talk to me. Don't look at me. You don't get to speak to me. You don't get to apologise. I hope you fucking die, Yulian. I hope you rot. I wish I never met you."

And for the first time in my life, I'm speechless.

He means it. I feel it.

Every word is a blade, and I let them carve into me because I deserve them. Because I failed. Because I wasn't enough. Because I'm not enough.

I stand there for a long moment, not knowing what to do, what to say, how to breathe. My hands are shaking. My throat is tight. And then I turn and leave.

I don't look back.

But as I climb the stairs, pain threading through every joint, I make a promise to myself.

This is not over. Not last week, and not tonight. But soon. I will help him get out; I swear it. He hates me right now, sure, because I was weak and failed to help him escape when I promised I would. Is he being a little harsh considering I did my best? Maybe.

But I understand his anger. And I can prove to him that I am capable, that I am smart and resourceful and I can get him out just like I promised. He's angry. He's hurt. But when I help him get out for good, he will know I'm not a failure.

I'll prove it.

I'll find a way to get him out, even if it kills me.

Because I'm not giving up on him.

I can't.

I'll come back tomorrow.

He'll see.

-

I creep back toward the basement, one day later. I'll try every night if I have to, even if I receive the same level of beatings as last week every time. I'll never stop trying. Not for him.

Like expected, the guard is absent, and I don't hesitate to tiptoe down into the basement, heart hammering, movements practiced, pain ignored-

The basement is empty.

I stand there, staring at the vacant space, the untouched shackles, the thin blanket still folded in the corner.

And nothing makes sense.

Then I hear footsteps behind me.

I turn.

My father.

Calm, composed and disgustingly satisfied.

"It's done," he says.

"What?" I say dumbly.

He gestures vaguely. "We got what we needed."

My stomach drops. "What did you need?"

He smirks. “Doesn’t matter. He’s gone. Sent him home.”

I don’t speak. Can’t speak. My mind is reeling, spinning, collapsing inward.

Gone? Gone.

Gone.

My mind races and I can’t help but think about how I never got to prove myself to him. I didn’t get to prove how capable I am, how desperately I truly did want to get him out. I couldn’t correct my failure. In the end, it was my father that got him out, not me. And now he hates me. And I have no way to change that.

I stare at the space where Vaughn once was, and I feel something in me break wide open. And in the silence that follows, I understand one thing with perfect clarity.

He may be gone.

But he’s mine.

Still. Always. And I will get him back.

Whatever it takes.

-

Present Day

Yulian

-

The party's still murmuring somewhere below, pulsing like a heartbeat beneath the floorboards, but I've had enough of people. Enough of entertaining their pathetic attempts at making nice with me and not-so-subtly flirting with me. Of course, I can't blame them, not when I'm easily the best-looking person in the room, but still.

Annie gives me a nod at the top of the stairs, where we had moved to talk, all warmth and effortless charm, and I offer her a lazy grin.

"Don't get killed on the way home," I say lightly, "it would be terribly annoying to find another person with computer skills such as yours.

She laughs, flicks me off with two fingers, and disappears back downstairs into the midst of the party, likely to find a handsome man to take home. Or two. Judging by that dress she's wearing, she will certainly have her pick of the litter.

I turn toward my room, the hallway empty and humming with the low bass vibrating through the walls from downstairs. My steps are light, fluid, calm, but something changes when I reach the door. A chill seeps through my bones. A prickle at the back of my neck. There is no noise. Not even a shadow. Just... a *feeling*. A pressure against the edges of my perception that tightens like a wire around the throat of my thoughts.

I stop.

Fingers curl around the door handle, but I don't turn it. Not yet.

Something's *different*.

Not danger. No. Danger feels like metal in the mouth. Like teeth. This is different, there is no fear, and even if I did think I were in danger there still wouldn't be any, but there is familiarity. That dry, hot tension in the air.

I smile, excitement lacing my skin.

I pull the knife from under my sleeve, just in case, and nudge the door open with slow, deliberate care.

The room is drenched in shadow, the only light coming from the sliver of moon slicing across the floor. I step inside, eyes adjusting immediately, because I live in darkness. I was *made* in darkness.

And then someone grabs me. I'm slammed hard against the wall; the breath knocked from my lungs with a punch of force I wasn't expecting. My knife drops, forgotten, clattering somewhere near my feet.

"Who is she?" a voice growls into my ear.

My pulse doesn't spike. It *soars*.

“Of *course*,” I breathe, grin curving slow and sharp across my lips, even as my shoulder protests under the weight. “Vaughn.”

In the back of my mind, I try to remind myself of our last conversation, of my warning toward him and how he has so clearly violated it. But all I can think is *he’s here. For me*.

He doesn’t move, not yet. He’s pressed close, yet it doesn’t feel close enough, breath ragged, hot, and furious against my cheek, and my heart is suddenly *singing*. My blood feels carbonated.

I don’t answer his question. I tilt my head instead, just enough to see the outline of his face in the dark.

“Answer my fucking question,” he roars, slamming me against the wall again and I’m glad the music rages on downstairs or else my guards might have come running.

I still say nothing, only allowing a sly grin in the form of a reply to spread across my face as I gaze just slightly down at him. He pulls a knife from his pocket and holds it to my throat, making my blood pump faster, but not from nerves, from excitement.

The sharp blade so close to my neck causes the scar across my chest to tingle in reminder of the last time he held a knife so close to me. I wonder if he will add to it. I almost hope he does.

Vaughn growls, pushing his body closer to mine as he still fails to get the reaction he craves. “Are you fucking deaf? You’re so pathetic. Nothing but a lying, manipulative, betraying-“

And just like that, he had to go and ruin the illusion, again. I thought he was supposed to be the calmer one, keeping a hold of his emotions like his father and all that. Yet, every time I see him it's like he loses his control on his anger more and more.

"What the *fuck* are you doing here?" I snarl, as loud as him, shoving against him in spite of the blade against my neck, rage and exhilaration crackling like electricity in my veins. "Did you forget what I told you? Did you forget that you're supposed to *stay the fuck away*?"

For a moment, I thought we could pretend, but if he doesn't want to play nice, then why should I?

"I remember," he says, voice low, almost level, but I can feel the tremble in it. The shake he doesn't want me to hear. "I remember you said we weren't good for each other. That we needed to stop. But you didn't say it was because you found someone else."

"What?" I blink, laugh. "What the *fuck* are you talking about?"

"The girl," he hisses, voice breaking around the edges. "The one that was all over you. The one you said you weren't interested in."

Oh, I see.

"Well, maybe I changed my mind," I say casually.

Vaughn actually growls and I struggle to keep my face neutral. I've tried my hardest lately to push him out of my mind, but now that he is here, in front of me, I can't help but allow my obsession to come

back out in full force.

Seeing him so clearly jealous, even if it is over someone I'm not the slightest bit interested in, makes my skin prickle in all the best ways.

"Like hell you have," Vaughn grits, "I'll go downstairs right now and slice her ear to ear in front of you. Let's see how interested you are in a corpse."

"I love it when you talk dirty to me."

"Shut the fuck up."

"Make me."

"You're delusional."

"Says the one jealous over a girl I've told you several times I've never been interested in."

"Wouldn't be the first time you've lied."

"Oh, for fucks sake, Vaughn," I scoff, finally pushing him off me completely. Something about him brining up lying and betrayal pisses me off every time. It's like it ruins the illusion, the fantasy. It's when I know we are no longer having fun, and he is truly fuelled with rage.

I shake my head at him. "She's not my lover; she just works for me.

She wants into the business. She's efficient, competent, annoying as hell, and smarter than most of the guys I work with, but she's *not* mine. Hell, I'm pretty sure she would rather die than ever belong to anyone, let alone me."

He hesitates, just for a moment. Enough for me to *feel* the confliction in him. His stance loosens slightly, but his body stays locked close to mine, still brimming with tension. He's calming down, but the storm's not over. Not even close.

I grin again.

"Are you going to apologise now?" I ask, almost sweetly. "For breaking into my room, assaulting me, accusing me of screwing my business associate, and generally behaving like a madman?"

"No."

Of course he fucking says no.

I bare my teeth, all fury and delight. "You arrogant piece of shit."

"Then why do you want me here?"

"I *don't* want you here."

"Liar."

God, I'm so fed up of that fucking word. Liar. Betrayer. Manipulator. I know I fucked up when we were kids. I should have tried harder; I should have thought it through more. I should have done so many things differently and it was my fault the escape failed. But I'm fed up of him holding it against me almost a decade later.

I don't understand why my mistake was so monstrous in his eyes. Hell, sometimes I'm not even entirely sure that my failure to get him out is even what he is talking about, because while I know I hurt him with my failure, can't he at least credit me that I tried?

I'm exhausted trying to make up for the miscalculation of a twelve-year-old boy who only wanted to help. Why can't Vaughn see that? Could his accusations be referring to something other than my failure to get him out that night? I can't see why he holds so much contempt for me over it eight years later.

I shove him again, harder this time, and he finally stumbles back enough to create real distance between us, but not because he has to, but because he lets me.

We stand there, panting, glaring, breathing each other in like poison and oxygen are the same thing. My skin's buzzing. My mind's burning. He's not supposed to be here. I told him to stay away. I told him we were *done*. I told him I couldn't do this.

But God, I *missed* him. Missed this, the way we tear at each other like lovers and enemies and something far worse. Missed the fury, the obsession, the pull that makes no sense and refuses to die.

There is nothing I wouldn't do for my sister, even forcing myself to stay away from the man I've been obsessed with for almost a decade to ensure I can control myself enough to stay on my father's good side. No fights, no sudden trips. I've attended meetings online and kept up

with paperwork. I'm almost certain my father will say yes to Tati moving here for the second semester. I just have one final, small stretch of perfect behaviour and she is free.

Which is exactly why him standing before me right now is possibly the worst thing that can happen. Because I have no control over myself when he is near. And I know my behaviour when it comes to Vaughn doesn't reflect my fathers wishes in the slightest, my need for him runs too deep and my obsession burns too bright.

He's chaos. And I *thrive* in it.

I told him to stay away, but here he is, crashing back into my life like a storm tearing the roof off everything I've tried to build since he left. And the worst part? The part that makes me feel sick and hungry and alive all at once?

I don't want him to leave.

Not now. Not ever.

But it doesn't matter what I want. What my sister needs, is most important. And what she needs is freedom, or she will suffocate in that house without it.

"You don't get to come in here," I say, voice lower, trembling with fury and desire and everything I can't name, "and act like you're owed something. You don't get to *accuse* me, to grab me, to throw me against the fucking wall-"

I don't finish the sentence. Because suddenly, his hand is in my hair.

And then his mouth is on mine.

And all thoughts of my sister leave my mind. If I had even the slightest bit of control over my own head when it comes to Vaughn, I'd know what a mistake I am making, how much I'm letting my sister down. Because if I let him back in again, I don't know if I'll be able to push him out. But I don't have any control. None, at all.

The kiss is not gentle. It's not careful. It's not any of the things it *should* be. But we have never been as we 'should' be. Not by societies standards, anyway.

It's a collision, raw, desperate, searing. Teeth and lips and heat. A kiss that feels like a war crime, like vengeance, like he wants to devour me and erase me at the same time.

And I let him.

I *let him*.

No. I kiss him back.

Because there's never been anyone else. Not for me. Not since that night in the basement. Not since the first time I saw him and wanted to break something just to see if he'd be able to resist me.

And as it seems, no he can't. But I can't resist him either.

His hands grip my shirt, twisting, pulling me impossibly closer. I press him back toward the wall this time, spinning us, taking control even though I have none. Our mouths slide, clash, collide again. It's a mess. A sin. A scream behind closed lips.

And I am *burning*.

His mouth tastes like fury, and we kiss like we want to destroy one another.

I walk him backwards almost without realising it, yet Vaughn makes no attempt to stop me. His grip on my shoulders is bruising and my own on his waist is worse. But we won't let one another go. Not when we have been longing this for so long. It's as if his touch is heroine. After that first touch, I haven't been able to stop craving it.

His hips hit the edge of the bed with a small bounce, and I don't hesitate to push him backwards, lying him down and climbing over him without allowing our lips to separate even for a moment. The second his back is flat; he pulls at my shirt like he wants to rip it in half.

"Off," he demands, and who am I to deny?

I help him, half-wrestling and half-melting into his body. The room around me spins. Our clothes hit the floor like dropped weapons, and I feel his cock pressing against me, hard and thick. I grin like it's a victory.

"Oh, fuck, Mishka," I whisper into his mouth, and I feel his whole-body shudder at the nickname. "I can feel how bad you want this," I mutter as I start trailing my lips down his neck and grind myself against him.

“Shut up,” he growls, arching up into me, “you talk too much.”

I laugh darkly. I know he’s lying. He loves the sound of my voice, I know it. He wants me loud and obnoxious and all over him. He wouldn’t provoke me so much if he didn’t. He wants the part of me that never lets him rest, the part that gnaws at the edges of his control until he snaps and pulls me in just like this.

He might struggle with admitting just how bad he wants me, but that doesn’t stop me from knowing it.

“Mm,” I hum, “don’t play hard to get, I know you love the way I sound.”

Without warning, he pushes on my side hard, causing me to fall to the side and roll onto my back. Not wasting a moment, he climbs on top of me, switching our positions.

“I thought I told you to shut up,” he grits down at me. He grabs both my wrists and holds them above my head against the mattress. I could easily escape, especially as he uses only one hand, as the other wraps itself around my throat, but I love the feeling of his hand near mine too much.

Not for the first time, I can’t help but imagine the feeling of his chains around my wrists instead and my cock gets impossibly harder.

He begins moving lower, trailing his lips down my chest and stomach as his hands release my wrists and I feel a deep moan leave my chest at the pleasure of it all. As well as his soft lips, I feel bites across my torso, marking me. Just as he reaches the spot I want him in the most,

he begins climbing back up me, leaving me groaning in frustration.

However, rather than coming back up to my mouth, he stops at my chest and mouths along it, before biting sharply several times, leaving wet kisses in between. It feels like he is doing them in some sort of pattern and when I glance down to look at him, I have to force myself not to cum on the spot.

He trails over the 'V' scar that he carved into me, clearly as turned on by it as I am. Deep red bite marks are scattered over, emphasizing its shape on me. It's without a doubt the most erotic thing I've ever witnessed.

After a while, I decide I'm fed up of the slow pace and hurriedly flip us back around. He trembles underneath me and I reach down to give his cock a few strokes.

"Yulian…" he groans, his eyes fluttering shut and back arching. I lean down and give him a deep, passionate kiss, inhaling through my nose. Then, I climb to the side of the bed and open a draw beside it, grabbing the unopened bottle of lube in there.

So what? Can't sue a guy for preparing for his fantasy about his crush climbing in through the window and having awesome sex. Besides, it came true, didn't it?

Upon seeing what's in my hand, Vaughn clenches his teeth. "Fucking finally," he grits. "Get down here. Now."

Grinning at his demand, I do as he asks, flipping the lid on the bottle and pouring a generous amount on my fingers. I have no doubt Vaughn will like it as rough and hard as me, but this will be his first time with a guy, and I don't want to hurt him. Not too bad, anyway.

But when I reach my lube-covered hand between his legs, he suddenly pushes my hand away roughly.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" he asks, looking at me with disgust on his face.

"Well, Mishka, I knew you'd like a bit of depravity with your sex, but using only your blood for your first time might be a bit much, even for you," I say sarcastically, annoyed by his expression.

He rolls his eyes at me, scoffing while shoving me further back. "What the fuck are you talking about. You are *not* fucking me."

"And what exactly did you think I was planning to do with this?" I ask, gesturing to my lube-covered hand.

"Prep yourself with it," he replies as if it were obvious.

I raise an eyebrow at him.

"I am not bottoming for you," he growls.

I blink, then let out a small chuckle, quiet and dangerous. "Why not? Afraid you'll like it?" I whisper into his ear.

"Fuck off!" He shouts jerking away from me. "Because I won't let *you* have me like that," he snaps, his voice low and sharp-edged. "You

think I'm just going to hand that over to you? After everything you've done?"

Like a knee-jerk reaction, I reach up and grip his throat tightly, cutting off his air. He wraps his own hand around mine immediately out of instinct but makes no serious attempt to move it. I'm not surprised, judging by the way his cock jerks against my stomach at the loss of air.

"You *want* it," I hiss, voice low as I lean in closer. "I *know* you do. I can see it on your face. You want me to split you open on my cock, to fill you up until the only thing you'll think of is my name and my cock owning every inch of you. You want me pounding into your tight ass over and over until I fill you with-"

It seems he has finally had enough, as he leans up and headbutts me. Hard. My hand leaves his throat, and he sputters, but I see the anger on his face.

I guess someone can't handle the truth.

"You're delusional," he spits, his voice raw, "*you're* the one who wants all those things, not me."

I chuckle darkly, "oh, Mishka, I most certainly do want those things, but not any more than you do. And I definitely won't be getting them until I hear you admit to wanting them first."

"Never," he declares, staring harshly at me.

I tilt my head. "We'll see about that."

While I truly know and believe everything I said, I'll admit, he's right about not wanting it tonight at least. Something is holding him back, pride, control, fear, maybe all three. And though it twists something sour in my chest, I know pushing him now won't get me what I want.

So I let it go.

For now.

I throw the lube away and wipe my hand on the sheets, then I lower myself again, reclaiming his mouth, taking back the space between us with bruising kisses and force, until he is breathless and grabbing at me like I'm the only solid thing in the world. Which I am, for him. I always have been, whether he wants to admit it or not.

Drawing back from him, I instead lower my mouth to his ear and whisper. "Don't worry, I won't fuck you tonight. There's a reason you have two holes." I move so my face is right in front of his, our noses almost touching and our eyes staring directly into one another. "Besides, I believe I'm owed a return of what I gave you in that warehouse."

His eyes go wide, but I don't allow him a moment of preparation. I grab him and push him back until his head and shoulders and propped up against the headboard, while the rest of him remains lying beneath me.

Then, I climb until I sit on his stomach and push up onto my knees so that my thick cock is right in front of his mouth. He stares up at me with fire in his eyes and presses his lips together.

I grin. It's like he still hasn't realised just how much his fight turns me on. I reach back down with one hand and pinch his nose, cutting off his air. He holds on, eyes gleaming as his face turns red in defiance.

Finally, he must give in. His mouth opens just slightly to take a much-needed breath, and I don't hesitate to seize my chance. I shove my cock straight down his throat, balls deep. He immediately chokes and reaches his hands up to grip my hips. I reach my own down to tangle in his hair, and I finally unleash all my pent-up frustration.

My hips thrust back and forth like a madman, fucking his throat harshly with no forgiveness. I know I'll have bruises on my hips from how tightly Vaughn holds them, but I take no notice. He's nothing but a toy to me in this moment, for me to use and play with however I see fit.

I let out a deep groan, throwing my head back. Through his full mouth, I hear Vaughn moan around my cock, turned on by how roughly I take him. The moans only push me further to the edge and I begin pulling his head toward me in time with my movements toward him.

I glance back down at him and see his glassy eyes and red face staring up at me, and as I cast a look behind me, I spot his rock-solid cock stood straight up, pre-cum leaking out of it. Watching him get so hard at just me fucking his throat, nothing touching him, makes my orgasm feel even closer.

My breathing quickens and I let out consistent, loud moans. My hips move faster and faster and I feel myself approaching my orgasm at a rapid speed. My hands tighten in Vaughns hair, and his hands tighten on my hips as if anticipating what he knows is coming. I give him no warning, as my vision turns white and I release deep down his throat, pushing my cock as far back as it can go.

Somewhere far away, I vaguely hear him choke and attempt to push me away, but I hold him tightly in place, causing another moan to slip from his lips. When I finally push all my cum down his throat, I pull away and sit back on the bed. Immediately when my cock leaves his mouth, he begins gasping for air. A few tears leak down his face.

"You like that, pretty boy?" I ask with a grin as I pant heavily. He says nothing, only glaring. But I can tell by how stiff his cock is that he did.

As his chest finally begins to slow and catches his breath, his hand moves toward his likely throbbing cock. I quickly dart forward and knock the hand away.

"Ah, ah, ah," I tell him. "You didn't think I'd leave you all high and dry, did you?"

With that, I lean my head down and take him into my own mouth and quickly begin bobbing up and down. His groans echo across my room, loud and unfiltered. One of his hands tangles in my hair, not attempting to control me at all, but seemingly just needing something to hold onto.

It doesn't take long. Quick enough, he cums in my mouth, but unlike him, I don't swallow it. Rather, I sit up and capture his lips in a deep kiss and when he opens his mouth into it, I push his cum from my mouth into his. He chokes in surprise but allows it to happen.

After a few more moments of deep kissing, I pull away from him.

Finally, as we both breathe heavily, satiating in our glow, I collapse beside him on the bed. He, too, lies flat on his back, arms spread wide, and eyes closed. I can tell he is not asleep yet, though, just resting them.

It seems I've truly tired him out. To his credit, I'm absolutely exhausted as well. I don't even feel like we did anything that strenuous, yet his mere presence is enough to completely tire me out.

"That was…" I hear him say. "Nice."

"Just nice?" I grin at him, turning my head to face him, only to find his own already staring straight at me. His eyes appear softer now, having lost the fire they held a few minutes ago. I find that I enjoy both equally.

"Well, shoving my own come in my mouth was a bit much," he jokes, and I can't help but chuckle back. This feels like a very rare moment, having Vaughn converse with me without seemingly wanting me dead at the same time, and I savour every second of it.

"Oh please, I felt your dick twitch against me while I was doing it," I reply and he rolls his eyes at me, but I see his cheeks redden slightly.

"Whatever."

I reach my hand toward him and gently run my fingers through his hair, a genuine smile gracing my lips. He gives me a matching one back.

I hold my arm closest to him out and gesture toward me. "Come on."

He scrunches his nose at me. "I am *not* being the little spoon."

I roll my eyes at him. Always trying to be difficult, my Mishka. One day I'll make sure he is the one begging me for a cuddle.

"I just came down your throat. Then made you swallow your own come via my mouth. I think you can handle being the little spoon for one night."

He sighs at my crudeness, but, after a moment's hesitation, shuffles toward me and rests his head on my shoulder, throwing his leg over my own. I wrap my arm around his waist.

I know we've just made things complicated, again. And I know I want, desperately, for my sister to be able to join me. But I also know that this is no longer something either of us can resist. I don't know how, but we will make it work. It won't be easy, but we will. My obsession runs far too deep to ever let him truly go. I'm sure of that.

We will figure it out. But not right now, when we are both exhausted. In the morning, when I get to wake up by his side for the first time.

-

Vaughn

-

I'm woken up to the sound of my phone buzzing.

It lies on the bed beside me, where it must have been half-heartedly thrown last night by either Yulian or myself while we ripped one another's clothes off.

As I blink awake, I notice we have changed positions from last night. I have rolled onto my back and Yulian has his face buried in my chest, one arm thrown over me. At the buzzing sound, he shuffles around slightly, and I quickly grab my phone. I'm ready to press decline, but when I note the caller, I press answer.

"G? It's three in the fucking morning, man."

My voice comes out groggy, still hoarse from the way Yulian fucked my throat last night, though, for a moment, I freeze, realising that if I'm at home, as Gareth thinks I am, it is definitely not three in the morning. However, he obviously doesn't realise as the next thing he says is:

"I need your help."

Well, that explains why he is so distracted as to not recognise the wrong time.

"Hold on," I say.

Shuffling away, I grab a pillow and gently shove it into Yulian's arms as a replacement for myself. He moves about a bit but otherwise stays asleep. I must have really tired him out last night. I shiver at the memory but quickly shake it away. I need to focus on Gareth right now.

I climb out of bed and move to the en-suit. I shut the door behind me before lifting the phone back to my ear. "I'm listening."

“Not sure if you figured it out by now, but we’ve been talking on Reddit.”

I groan. “Did you have to shatter the illusion?”

“Kind of. He’s dying, V.”

My mouth opens and my heart races at the genuine worry in my friend’s voice. I am so not prepared for this right now, but I know I need to be there for Gareth. I don’t think I’ll ever be able to fully communicate how much talking to him online has helped me these last few months. I owe him so much.

“Fuck, man,” I release a long breath. “What can I do?”

“I already called Aunt Rai, but I want to double my efforts. Kayden… That’s his name. Kayden.”

I don’t tell him I’ve already figured that out myself and especially not that I spent so long being jealous over thinking him and my own man were a thing.

“He’s become a target of this stupid-ass organization because of me. Because he’s with…me. And I want to kill his brother and all of them, but Simone and Jethro tell me that would be hard and I’d become a target and so would Kayden if he…”

Gareth trails off, but I know what he can’t say.

“He will.” My voice comes out calm and steady and considering all the other things happening in my head right now, I’m pretty proud of myself. “From what you told me, he’d never leave you, right?”

“I want to think he wouldn’t, but he…he went into the bullet’s path to protect me. He didn’t think about it, he…he ran straight toward death like a fucking idiot.”

“I don’t think he wanted to die per se. He just didn’t want *you* to die.” I pause. “He’s a keeper. G. I like you much better when you’re with him.”

“Hey, does that mean you never liked me before?”

“You were always just fucking shit up while you were being a golden boy. Now, you’re all right, I guess.”

I’m just telling the truth; he really was a golden boy who is way more fun now that we know he enjoys chaos as much as the rest of us.

“Gee, thanks.”

“Anytime, my bro.”

“Will you talk to your dad about protection?”

“I’ll make it happen.” My voice softens, or as much as it is capable of. “I’ve got your back man. Always.”

“Thanks. And, V?”

“Yeah?”

“You deserve better.”

I blow out a breath. “I know.”

I say it because now isn’t the time to unleash my worries on Gareth, but I can’t help but think, with what I’m likely about to do, that’s it’s Yulian that deserves better, not me.

“I’m always here. Until you figure your shit out.”

“Thanks, G.”

He hangs up and I sigh, leaning my back against the door and closing my eyes.

The room smells like him, faint cologne and something warm, masculine, familiar.

I didn't mean for it to happen. I *really* didn't. I didn’t come here to see him, didn’t come here for *this*, for tangled sheets and bitten lips and bruises on my neck I don’t even remember getting. I was sent here for information, for silence, for subtlety. I was meant to come and go without a trace, a ghost, a shadow, not a man who lets himself fall

back into the same cycle of obsession and fire like it never burned him in the first place.

But then I saw him. With her.

The same girl he has already reassured me once about. But it wasn't enough. Not for my blinding rage. She was standing close, laughing at something he said, and Yulian was *smiling*. That same lazy, lethal grin that always made something in my chest twist. And it felt like everything inside me cracked open at once.

I snapped.

I didn't even *mean* to come here, not truly. Not at first. But my body moved before my mind could stop it, and suddenly I was climbing through his window like a fucking criminal, like a junkie breaking into the dealer's house, starving for a fix I swore I didn't need anymore.

And then he was there, angry, livid, the way he always is with me when I cross a line I wasn't supposed to, and God, I *wanted* him. I kissed him. I *fucking kissed him*. And the worst part? I'd do it again. Over and over again until I forgot why it was wrong in the first place.

He was fire under my hands. Heat and teeth and control. Every time his mouth touched mine, I forgot what year it was. Forgot where we were. Forgot who I'm supposed to be.

It didn't matter that I knew I'd be leaving the next day.

It didn't matter that I'd sworn to myself I wouldn't let him in again, that he told me to stay away.

Because when his hands were on me, when he looked at me like I was something he *needed*, I didn't care.

It's not that I didn't want to go all the way with him. Hell, I would have done if he was wiling to let me top, but I couldn't allow him to have me like that. It's the one part of me I can cling onto, that doesn't yet belong to him and never will.

Not when I still can't forgive him for what he did to me, what he let happen, when I was eleven years old and felt more betrayal and heartache than most do in a lifetime.

He hasn't said sorry.

Not once.

Not a single acknowledgement that it was *him*, that it was *his father* who shattered me and *him* who played the part. Even now, years later, he acts like he has no idea what I'm talking about when I accuse him of lying like he has done so many times before. Like we can just sweep it all under the rug and fuck each other into forgetting.

But I haven't forgotten.

And I haven't forgiven.

And I don't think I ever will.

It's the last piece. The jagged one. The one that keeps me from handing over the rest of myself. Because no matter how obsessed I am

with him, no matter how badly I want to stay in that bed forever, kissing his mouth and breathing the same air, I can't pretend we're whole.

We're not.

We're broken. And I know we always will be.

God, it was *so good*, though.

The way he touched me. The way we moved. Like we'd never been apart. Like we belonged like that, teeth and hands and breath and that awful, beautiful need that never really leaves me. And after, when everything softened, when the fight drained out of us and we lay together, tangled on his sheets like it was something sacred, I thought, *maybe*. Just for a moment.

His arm around my waist. My head tucked against his neck. The steady, slow rise and fall of his breath lulling me to sleep. It was the closest I've felt to peace in years.

Since the basement.

But it's not real.

It *can't* be.

Because he kept me in that hellhole for as long as I was.

I've already decided I'm not transferring to the UK. I'm going back to the States in the morning, and I'll stay there for a long time. Our families are still enemies. Nothing's changed, not really. And because staying, *choosing him*, would mean letting go of a grudge so old and deep it's practically part of my DNA now.

I thought maybe I could learn to be with him without forgiving him. But I can't.

I'm not ready.

I don't think I ever will be.

I creep back into his room and toward his desk, finding a pen and notepad.

My handwriting is careful, even though my hand shakes.

I've gone back to the US. Don't contact me.

-V

I don't say goodbye.

I fold the note in half and leave it on his nightstand, just beside the empty space where my body used to be. He's still asleep, still curled into the warmth we left behind, unaware of what I'm about to take from him.

I don’t let myself look at him too long.

Because if I do, I won’t go.

And I have to go.

I tell myself he will want this as much as me. After all, he was the first to tell me to stay away and I was the one that broke it. Last night was a momentary lapse in judgement as much for him as it was for me.

I slip out the window before the sun rises, before he wakes up.

And every step away from him feels like I’m tearing something out of my own chest.

But I keep going.

Because being with him is one thing.

But forgiving him is another.

And I don’t know how to do both.

-

The stairs groan beneath my weight as I climb into the jet, the early

morning air still clinging to my clothes like fog that hasn't decided whether to lift or settle. The cabin is dim, tinted by the soft blue of recessed lighting and the too-clean sterility of polished steel and leather. I drop into one of the seats without ceremony, politely shaking my head at the flight attendant's offer of something to drink, and let my head fall back against the cushioned headrest.

It's quiet.

Like the air itself is trying not to comment on the way I'm leaving a war behind without firing the final shot.

I've just hung up the phone with my dad, the call still echoing faintly in my skull, the steady cadence of his voice wrapping around me like it always does; calm, authoritative, faintly amused, and unmistakably in control.

As promised, I asked for him to help Gareth and his man however he can. He was already faintly aware of the situation due to Aunt Rai, who (not asked, demanded, as my dad specified) that he assist in her nephew's safety.

While I saw plenty of my dad and Aunt Rai's antics growing up, my dad also added how the fact that she asked him for help when she 'probably wouldn't piss on him if he were on fire' meant it was serious. Thankfully, while he takes his role as Pakhan seriously and likes to keep his stern and cold reputation, I know he does care for his nieces and nephews and takes it as a personal offense should any of them come to any harm.

Then, once we had finished that conversation, he asked if, during my flight back, I could put together a full report of what I had seen, head, learned etc on the island.

Things like patterns in behaviour, power dynamics, operational vulnerabilities. Anything worth noting from the Serpents or our own people, anything that could be used, shaped, pushed toward our advantage. He wants it concise but thorough.

I'll mention the guarded conversation I overheard about a shipment from Lake Michigan. I'll include a few cryptic references to internal tension, absences that raise questions, names whispered too cautiously, and power shifting in ways I have no doubt that Yulian has already seen. I'll sketch the bones of what I witnessed in terms of how Jeremy and Nikolai are coping with the slight fracture within the Heathens at the moment, as well as how their recent relationships may impact them and their ability to do their roles.

But I will not, *will not*, write a single word about *him*.

Not the window.

Not the confrontation.

Not the bedroom.

Not the way he looked at me like I was something he couldn't decide whether to kiss or kill.

That part, the part that actually matters, I'll cut out before it ever touches paper.

Because there's no way to explain that I went in for surveillance and came out with someone else's fingerprints all over my skin. There's no report that can neatly justify the fact that I opened my mouth to lie

and accidentally whispered truth instead. That I forgot who I was for long enough to believe he could ever be mine.

Not to mention, of course, that the very idea of my dad knowing anything that I've done with Yulian over the last eight years, let alone twelve hours, fills me with burning dread.

So, as the jet begins to move down the runway, I plan on grabbing my laptop as soon as we hit cruising altitude to write down absolutely everything that happened in the last two days other than the one thing that meant the most to distract myself from that one thing.

He's asleep right now. He'll wake to an empty bed and a note that says nothing at all. And maybe, *maybe*, he'll feel a sliver of what I feel now. Maybe he will hate me for it.

I almost hope he does.

-

It's early evening by the time I pull up outside my parents' house. The drive from the airfield to here didn't take long, but it still felt eternal. I spent most of it with one hand braced on the window, watching New York flicker past like something too fast to hold onto.

The report only took me a couple of hours to finish. I drafted it somewhere over the Atlantic, eyes heavy, brain already numb, pouring every relevant detail I could recall into concise, clinical language. Names. Movements. Tensions. The kind of thing my father expects. I sent it off before I even landed, assuming it will sit unread in his inbox until he needed to reference it during some future meeting. He didn't even ask me to format it properly, just told me to write. Probably to just get me used to them more than anything else.

After that, I slept. Not deeply. Not well. But enough to ease the exhaustion clinging to my bones after what the night before had taken from me. I can still feel Yulian's fingers on my skin if I think too hard, and I don't want to, so I don't. Or at least, I try not to.

I step inside and the house immediately wraps around me like it always does, warm and quiet and familiar. Safe, in that way only something you've never questioned can be. One of the house staff spots me before I even get both shoes off.

"Your father's office," she says, not unkindly. "They're waiting for you."

They.

Plural.

I blink. "My mother's in there too?"

She nods. "Yes. Both of them."

I murmur a thank-you and head down the hallway, heart ticking a little faster now. I wasn't expecting *this*. I thought maybe I'd get a nod of approval. A passing comment about the report. But this? This feels more formal. More intentional.

Usually, any family chats or catch-ups would just be held in the living or dining room. My father's office always means business. The fact that they want to meet in there so soon after I get back and both of them? A wave of unease sets within me.

Still, part of me figures it's a good thing. If they're both together, it saves me from repeating myself. I was planning to tell them tonight anyway, that I won't be transferring to the UK, that I've decided to stay here and complete my degree in the States. That the distance is necessary.

I step into the office and my father is seated behind his desk, posture perfect. My mother sits on his lap as he drapes one arm around her waist. My parents have never shied away from affection, especially not my father and especially not in front of me. It's never bothered me. Well, sometimes the kissing does, but I usually just scrunch my nose and my mother scolds my dad for it.

"Sit, sweetheart," she says gently, gesturing to the chair across from them.

I do. Slowly. Carefully. My stomach knots a little, but I push it down.

"I actually have something I wanted to talk to you both about," I begin, voice measured.

"We do too," my father says before I can continue, tone brisk. "Would you like to go first or us?"

"You guys can," I insist.

There's a brief silence. Then he smiles, not the sort he gives his business partners or fellow mafia members, but a genuine one, from father to son.

“Your trip to the UK,” he says, “was a test.”

I blink.

“A test?”

He nods. “To evaluate your readiness. Your ability to handle intelligence-gathering, analysis, discretion, field decisions. Everything we’ve been training you for, as future Pakhan, in a real-world context.”

I stare at him, the words taking longer than they should to register. “You didn’t tell me it was a test.”

“That’s the point of a test, Vaughn,” my mother says, voice light. “To see what you’ll do when you don’t know it’s a performance.”

“We were impressed,” my father says, tapping the desk lightly. “The report was strong, detailed, insightful, tactical. More importantly, we reached out to several contacts on the island afterward. Not a single one had any idea you were even there.”

I feel something shift in my chest. It should be pride. It *should* be.

But it’s not.

It’s dread.

I don't know why.

"You proved something," he continues. "Something important. That you're ready."

My mother beams, and my father's smile sharpens, the proud, expectant look of a man who sees his legacy rising before him. A crown passed without words.

"We've already contacted our friends in the Irish, Italian, Russian, and Albanian branches," he says. "Informed them that you'll be our family's point of contact in the UK moving forward. Given your proximity, you'll oversee negotiations, information transfers, trade management. You'll represent us directly."

The air leaves my lungs in one slow, measured breath. "Wait, what?"

"We're transferring your registration effective immediately," my mother says. "When you start next semester in the UK."

No.

I feel the word echo through my skull, but I don't say it. I don't *say* anything. I just sit there, nodding slowly, blank-faced, perfectly still, the model heir.

"We're proud of you," my father says. "You've proved you're ready for leadership."

I want to laugh. I want to scream. I want to throw the chair across the room and tell them that this is the *last* place I want to be sent, that I *just* left that island behind, left *him* behind, and now they want me to go back, to sit in the same classrooms, walk the same streets, *see him* every day?

They're sending me to live in the shadow of the thing I've spent the last eight years trying to survive.

"Thank you," I say instead, the words slipping out like breath.

My father nods, satisfied.

"We also did just want to ask…" my mother trails off. "If you will be alright with the Serpents. Specifically, their leader?"

She asks hesitantly, like she is trying not to step on any toes. I love my mom, but she is even worse when it comes to tip-toeing around the kidnapping than my dad. Neither of my parents have ever told me any details, but I know from context clues and overheard conversations that my mother was a rageful wreck when I was gone. If it weren't for my father, she likely would have marched straight to Chicago herself and put a bullet straight in Anatoly Dimitriev's head.

"It was a long time ago," I say, shrugging my shoulders, "I'll be fine."

I won't lie, I'm quite proud of how well I held myself together saying that.

"Good," says my father.

There's a brief pause, and then my mother smiles. "You said you wanted to tell us something too, darling?"

I hesitate. Just a second too long. And then I reach for the first thing I can fabricate.

"I- I was just going to suggest that we officially announce my transfer at this year's winter gala. I guess now we have even more reason to, more to celebrate."

My mother nods thoughtfully. "That's a great idea. I'll speak to our coordinators."

She stands and rounds the desk, arms open. "Group hug."

It's a ritual. One she clings to. She has always been very insistent that, regardless of my dad being the Pakhan, he is still my dad, and she is still my mom, and she will treat me as such. My father rises too, and I allow them both to wrap themselves around me, warm and firm and proud, the family unit we present to the world.

I don't return the embrace as strongly.

I let my arms fall loosely around them, my chin on my mother's shoulder.

And I stare past them, through the dark wood of the office shelves, past the glinting silver of heirloom frames and awards, and into the empty space between one breath and the next.

Because I know what this means.

I know where I'll be.

And I know who else will be there.

Two more years. At least.

I left him. I *chose* to leave. I *meant* to leave.

But I'm going back anyway.

Because I don't get to choose.

Not anymore.

-

Yulian

-

The first thing I notice when I wake up is the cold.

Not the kind that comes from the window being open or the sheets falling off, no, this is different. This is absence. A cold shaped like a

body that *should* be next to mine but isn't. It settles into the empty space between the sheets like smoke, like regret, and my eyes fly open before my mind can catch up.

The room is too quiet.

The air is still.

And I know, deep in my bones, that he is gone.

I sit up, slowly, scanning the shadows like maybe I missed him, like maybe he's just in the bathroom or sitting in the corner with that sharp, guarded look he gets when he doesn't want me to know what he's thinking. But the door to the ensuite is wide open and empty. His clothes are gone. His shoes. His scent is already fading from the pillow.

I feel it before I see it, that tightening in my chest, slow and inevitable, like someone is winding wire around my ribs.

Then I spot the note.

I pick it up with two fingers, as if it might burn me.

I've gone back to the US. Don't contact me.
—V.

That's it.

No apology. No explanation. No softness.

Just *gone*.

The ache hits first, sharp and nauseating, right under the sternum. Not panic. Not fear. Just that quiet, devastating *hurt* that only comes when someone you let in decides to leave without saying goodbye. And the worst part? I let him in again. After everything. After telling him to stay away and him refusing. I let him in, because I wanted him. Because I *always* want him. I let myself believe, even just for a night, that he could be mine again. That we could have something. Something twisted and dark and maybe doomed, but *ours*.

But it was a game.

Just another move in whatever scheme he's running now.

He came here, touched me, kissed me, *slept with me*, and then walked away without a word.

I sit back on the bed, staring at the note in my hand, and I can feel the change within me happening. The hurt curdling. The sadness blackening.

The rage takes over like a fire catching silk.

My fingers tighten around the paper until it crumples into my palm. My jaw locks. My teeth grind. And my chest fills with something heavy and furious and wild.

He *used* me.

Again.

Played me. Tasted me. Took what he wanted and vanished.

I clench my fists, feel my nails digging into the meat of my palm, and I let the anger bloom, let it *consume*. Because it's better than heartbreak. Better than lying here and wishing he'd stayed.

He didn't stay.

He *left me*.

Just like before.

And now?

Now he has to deal with what that means.

I stand, breathing hard, pacing the room like a storm trapped in a cage. I should've known. Should've expected it. Vaughn Mozorov belongs to *me* and yet he thinks *he* gets to decide when to come and go like I'm some forgettable fucking stop on a map.

No.

He *doesn't*.

I stare at the crushed note in my hand, and I can feel it already, the obsession sinking in again. The need to *have him*, to control him, to *make him pay*. Because he's not a boy in the basement anymore, and I'm not the boy sneaking him food and water and comfort. I'm not the son who smiles and obeys and tries to help those I care for get away from me for their sake.

I'm Yulian Dimitriev.

Future pakhan of the Chicago Bratva.

And I will *not* be disrespected.

He had better stay in the US.

He had better stay as far away from me as possible.

Because if he comes back to the UK, if he *dares* show his face again on this side of the ocean, I won't be able to stop myself.

I'll ruin him.

And I'll enjoy every second of it.

Chapter End Notes

hope you guys enjoyed.

like i mentioned at the start im exhausted so im not gunna do a lengthy thing explaining my thought process this time, but i will say i did really enjoy this chap. maybe tomorrow i will post something lengthy on my tumblr explaining this chap like i usually do in end notes. if you guys have any questions feel free to comment below or ask me on tumblr its lucsf19 (the same as here).
this chap marks the end of the flashbacks so no more of those from now on. next chap will also be a small time jump to the start of the second semester where vaughn of course will be on the island having transferred and we will officially be past KTV timeline.
thanks for the support < 3

Chapter Fifteen

Chapter Notes

> hi guys, sorry its been so long. ive moved between these two chapters, plus celebrated a close friends birthday so ive been a little busy.
> like i said last chap, there is a small time jump to this chapter and no more flashbacks.
> it is currently 1:30am so im not gunna write much lol. im very tired.
> enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wheels hit the tarmac with a low groan, with a sound that vibrates up through the soles of my shoes and lodges somewhere behind my ribs, adding to the heaviness that has been residing there since the moment I found I had no choice but to spend the next couple years of my life here. The descent has been smooth, and yet my chest still feels tight, like the altitude's lingering in my lungs. Maybe it's not the altitude at all.

The moment the cabin doors hiss open, I'm on my feet, coat in hand, jaw tight. The air outside is damp and grey, familiar in a way that makes my stomach twist, as though the island itself remembers me and is already whispering its own bitter welcome.

At the bottom of the stairs, Gareth is waiting.

He looks the same, tall, lean, golden hair slicked back with his usual precision, though there's something warmer in his eyes than I'm used to. Perhaps all this time with that professor of his has loosened him up a bit.

It hasn't been long since we last saw one another. He was home over Christmas, of course, though he and the other Heathens decided to

head back to the UK a little earlier than me. I think I've just been clinging to the comfort of having an ocean between *him* and I before it's taken away.

Gareth opens his arms without a word, and I step into the embrace, giving him a firm clap on the back in the classic 'bro-hug' sort of way. Over these recent holidays especially, after discovering our online friendship, we have grown even closer. He's definitely the one who knows me best now, especially as he knows my secrets.

"Look who finally decided to join us," he says with a grin, pulling away. Now that I know his true nature, I can easily spot the slight sadism within his smile, and it still shocks me how we all missed it for so long.

"Had to come save you lot from yourselves," I mutter, the corner of my mouth lifting despite myself. "Where are the others?"

He snorts and nods toward his car, or 'Medusa' as he calls it, idling nearby. "Back at the mansion. Still got some important stuff to catch up on since getting back."

We climb into his car, Gareth behind the wheel, me in the passenger seat, and the engine hums to life with the low growl of a beast that's been waiting patiently. I watch the landscape blur past as we leave the airport behind, the familiar roads, the damp hedgerows, the faint outline of the cliffs in the distance. The air smells like wet stone and salt, like something raw and ancient.

"So," Gareth says after a beat, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel, "how does it feel being back on the island?"

I don't look at him.

“Good,” I lie, too easily. The words leave my mouth like they’ve been rehearsed, like they’re laminated and pre-approved.

There’s a pause.

Gareth scoffs softly. “I would have thought we were close enough by now for you to not lie to me.”

I glance at him then, but he doesn’t meet my eyes, just keeps his gaze forward, expression unreadable.

“I’m fine,” I say, but it sounds thin, even to me.

“You sure?” he asks, voice too casual to be genuine. “I mean… you’re on the same island as *him*.”

I close my eyes for a moment, letting my head lean back against the seat. The leather’s cold against my skin. Of course *he* would come up. Of course, Gareth wouldn’t let it slide.

“I don’t know,” I admit, finally. “I don’t know how I feel.”

There’s silence for a few seconds, but I can feel Gareth watching me out of the corner of his eye, reading between the lines, like he always does. While we’re all pretty much genius’ in our own right, he’s always been the ‘smart’ one due to his commitment to his academics that the rest of us lack. However, since his psychopathic tendencies (and his fuck-his-professor-tendencies) have been revealed, the label has faded. Though, with the way his eyes analyse and scan me now, I

can tell the label is still very much true.

“There hasn’t been any contact,” I say after a moment. “Not since before the holidays. Not a single text. No late-night calls. No videos. Just… silence.”

Gareth doesn’t say anything, yet I can tell it’s his way of allowing me the space to continue in my own time.

“And you know how he is,” I add, a bitter little laugh escaping before I can stop it. “He’s obsessed with me. Can’t go more than a few days without annoying me with something ridiculous. Taunting me, flirting with me. Sending videos of him fighting.”

“And now?” Gareth asks, quiet.

“Now it’s like I don’t exist.” I exhale slowly, watching the rain gather on the window. “I don’t know what that means. I don’t know where his head’s at.”

Gareth’s knuckles tighten slightly around the steering wheel. “You’ve been avoiding talking about it.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“So… what did happen exactly the last time you saw each other?” he presses, not at all gently. “What was it like?”

I hesitate.

My tongue sits heavy behind my teeth. I look out the window, keeping my face neutral. “It was… fine.”

Gareth lets out a sharp breath through his nose. “Bullshit.”

I glance over. His eyes are on the road, but his expression is all judgment. “It doesn’t matter,” I say. “We’re on opposite sides of a war, remember? All the history, all the blood. Nothing’s changed.”

“Hasn’t it?” Gareth asks.

I don’t answer.

Because I don’t know.

Because the truth is that I still think about Yulian’s face in the dark, the curve of his lip when he smirks, the fire in his eyes when he’s angry. I still remember the heat of his mouth, the scrape of his teeth, the way his voice sounded when he whispered my name like it was a sin and a prayer in one. I still feel him under my skin, like a fever I never recovered from.

And yet- I left. I left, and now he hasn’t said a word to me in months. And I have no clue where we stand, what he thinks of me.

I stare out the windshield, watching the trees thicken, the coastal road winding toward something that feels like fate and doom wrapped in ivy and stone.

We're getting closer.

It's odd to think how close I am to him right now, after having an ocean in between us for so long.

And I have no idea what's waiting for me.

-

By the time we turn off the main road and start up the long, tree-lined drive that snakes toward the mansion, I've managed to somewhat push Yulian from my mind. It won't last long, I'm sure, but hopefully at least for tonight while I catch up with my fellow Heathens. But then, as we approach the driveway, a distinct feeling settles in my stomach and, just from looking at the house, I feel that I'll be seeing a lot more than just the Heathens tonight.

Not to mention that they haven't exactly been subtle with the stringed lights looped along the hedges, spilling out onto the front steps. Warm gold bulbs glow in the dusk like fireflies trapped in glass. There's music floating through the open windows, upbeat, and much too loud for a casual evening, and a scent so mixed in the air that it can only be a buffet.

Gareth pulls the car to a smooth stop and gives me a side glance that's far too smug. "And here I thought he said it was going to be a surprise," he mutters, then pushes his door open and gets out.

I clamber out alongside him, and we walk toward the door.

"He's here!" we hear Nikolai yell. Gareth makes eye contact with me

before rolling his eyes and I let out a chuckle.

We stop by the front door. “I did tell him there was no way you wouldn’t realise there was a surprise party the moment we pulled in through the gates,” Gareth tells me just before he opens the door.

Suddenly I’m being pulled into the hallway, which has been transformed into something that looks like Pinterest met organised crime and fell in love - champagne bottles in silver buckets, a velvet banner stretched across the grand staircase that reads *WELCOME, V* in looping cursive, and glitter I’m already dreading finding in my clothes three weeks from now.

Maya launches herself at me first, arms out and a wide grin spread across her face as she drags me into a crushing hug. While I care for both of the young Sokolov twins, I’ve always been closer to Maya, who in turn is very close with my cousin Lidya. The three of us made quite the trio growing up, and with mine and Gareth’s newfound friendship, we are slowly growing into a foursome.

Not too far behind her stands Ilya, whom I’m yet to formally meet. Being Jeremy’s guard, I would be surprised he isn’t stood closer to him, but with the things I’m hearing about going on between Ilya and Maya lately, I can’t say I’m shocked.

“Oh my god, V, I’ve missed you so much!” Maya squeals, pulling away from me to look me up and down.

I chuckle. “It’s only been a few weeks, My.”

She rolls her eyes at me and opens her mouth to say something but is quickly pushed away by a much bigger body. “Stop hogging him, Maya,” Nikolai tells his younger sister as she scowls at him in return.

“My turn,” he says, turning to me and pulling me in for a hug and clapping me on the back.

However, it doesn’t last long as he rapidly pulls back from me, keeping one hand on my arm still. His face takes on a serious expression as he looks me dead in the eye. “There is someone extremely important you need to meet. Ignore everyone else. Especially the one that tries to claim he looks identical to the important person. Spoiler: he doesn’t.”

I glance over his shoulder at the ‘everyone else’ he is referring to, taking in the crowd of both familiar and unfamiliar faces, sporting a range between amused to disgusted expressions. It doesn’t take me long to spot the important person he is talking about.

Thanks to the research I did for my father (and the fact that Nikolai never shuts up about his ‘lotus flower’) I immediately recognise Brandon King. To Niko’s credit, while Brandon certainly does have someone he looks identical to, they are easy to tell apart due to one having a distinct level of psychoticism on his face.

Paying no mind to anyone else in the room (who seem content to let Niko do as he likes without interruption) Nikolai steps backward and grabs Brandon by the waist, pulling him forward to his side in front of me. A polite, genuine smile decorates the British man’s face as he leans gently into Niko beside him.

“This is my wonderful, brilliant, gorgeous boyfriend, Brandon. Also known as: Lotus Flower. Don’t bother saying what you’re thinking, I already know it. We *are* the world’s most perfect couple, aren’t we?”

Beside him, Brandon rolls his eyes. “Niko!” he groans, though the smile and tint of red across his high cheeks suggests he isn’t all that bothered by it.

He reaches an arm out. “Hi, I’m Brandon King. It’s lovely to meet you finally, I’ve heard great things.”

In turn, I reach my own arm out to shake his hand, only to find it slapped away by Nikolai, whose face has quickly turned to a scowl. “No touching what’s mine, or I’ll cut that hand right off.”

Although I know it’s a (mostly) empty threat, being his future Pakhan and all, I still drop my arm. I’ve grown up with Nikolai and know his tendencies all too well, so I don’t fancy testing what he capable of doing to someone who touches what’s his.

“Sorry about him,” Brandon apologises sheepishly, but doesn’t make a second attempt at the handshake.

I smile at him. “No worries. I know what he is like,” I tell Brandon, side-eyeing Niko.

“I think we all know what he is like,” Jeremy interrupts, gently pushing Niko away, though likely only because of Brandon stood at his side, before pulling me into a hug of his own. Nikolai grumbles, his hold on Brandon tightening, mumbling about Jeremy being no better.

Once Jeremy and I are done, I expect Killian to step forward and do the same, but he doesn’t move from where his arm rests possessively around Glyndon.

“I hope you don’t mind the surprise,” Jeremy redirects my attention back to him, “Niko thought it would be a good idea to get together so you can meet everyone at once. We thought it was a good idea.”

Niko nods his head. “Hell yeah, I have all the best ideas.”

Turning his head so only Gareth and I can see his face, Jeremy raises his eyebrows at me, prompting all three of us to chuckle, and Nikolai to immediately begin questioning what is so funny.

“Anyway,” says Gareth, “let’s introduce you to everyone.”

However, before he can start, someone steps forward of their own accord. Though, I’m not surprised, judging from the things I’ve heard.

“Landon King,” the brunette introduces himself, a smirk spreading across his face. “I’m sure you’ve heard plenty about me.”

I look him up and down, wondering if this posh British man is really the one who has been tormenting the Heathens for years. If it weren’t for the stories I’ve heard about him, I’d feel a little ashamed that my friends were bested by such a man. However, I know for a fact that this rich boy is capable of much more than he seems.

“Plenty, indeed,” I say calmly back. “Nice to meet you dude.” I raise my hand to offer a handshake, and I see slight annoyance cross Landon’s face when he fails to get any sort of significant reaction out of me.

He doesn’t hesitate to take my hand in a firm handshake. “Bit young to be the supposed leader, aren’t you?” he says casually. Well, the other Heathens certainly weren’t kidding about Landon’s knack for instigating chaos. However, the perfect response crosses my mind as I see Mia roll her eyes and lightly elbow him in the side.

“Well, I am the same age your lovely girlfriend here. Does that mean you think she wouldn’t make a good leader?”

Landon doesn’t even bat an eyelid. Rather, a sly smirk grows on his face. “I do think I’ll enjoy having you around, Morozov. And, by the way, my muse here would make a better leader than everyone else in this room combined. Do not insult her or imply otherwise again.”

Though the smirk remains on his face, I can tell he is entirely serious with his warning. Apparently not even the Pakhan’s son himself is enough to scare him.

Mia, who had been glaring up at her boyfriend after my words, now gazes up at him with a smug look. She finally pushes him back, and while I know he’s more than big enough to not let her, he moves back without complaint. Then, she turns to me and gives me a genuine smile, stepping forward to wrap her own arms around me.

“It’s so good to have you here, Vaughn.”

Even months later, I still get shocked at hearing her speak, even if I don’t show it. No matter how much torment he has put my friends through, I must give Landon King credit where credit it due. He is the reason my friend has her voice back.

When Mia pulls away, I’m immediately pulled into another hug by Annika, and when I glance over her shoulder, I make eye contact with Creighton King, and if looks could kill, let’s just say he would have put me down in seconds. Upon making eye contact with the quieter King, I grin, before lifting Annika off the ground and spinning her around, prompting a loud laugh to fly from her lips.

At this, he finally takes a step toward us, and I drop Annika swiftly onto her feet and take a step away from here, casually throwing my hands up and flashing Creighton my 'innocent eyes'.

"You must be Creighton," I say brightly, "*so* nice to meet you, bro."

When Creighton fails to respond, Annika steps in. "Sorry," she smiles, "he doesn't like to talk much. But he's so happy to meet you!"

Yeah, I can totally tell by the way he's glaring daggers at me.

"Right back at him," I reply with a wink.

Then, a small girl with long, silvery hair steps forward, and I recognise her straight away as Cecily. I've heard and seen plenty of her, but this is the first time I've ever been so close. "Sorry about him," she offers me with a gentle smile, "our Cray Cray has always been on the quieter side. I'm Cecily, Jeremy's girlfriend."

As if to confirm her statement, Jeremy steps to her side, wrapping an arm possessively around her waist, gazing down at her with admiration and affection.

"Yet another lovely woman who I've heard nothing but praise for," I return her grin. I'd offer a hug, but judging by the way Jeremy is looking at me after my compliment, I'd rather not risk getting my arm snapped in half.

Cecily's cheeks warm at my praise, before moving to the side and turning her body to look at the pair stood behind her. "This is-

“-Remington Astor, or His Lordship, if you fancy.” A very tall man, Remington, apparently, steps forward, a gorgeous blonde at his side, who I recognise as Ava Nash. Pretty much all the men in this room are on the taller side, but Remington seems to have an inch or so on even Nikolai, whose generally always been the tallest of us.

However, from the small bit of research I’ve done on him due to being a member of the Elites and having a close relationship with my friend’s partners, I know he is captain of the basketball team, so his height must come in handy.

“And I’m Ava Nash,” Ava adds. A tight, pink dress wraps around her, accentuating her curves and brightening her blue eyes. “You can just ignore him,” she gestures to the man beside her, “that’s what the rest of us do.”

I hear a few chuckles behind me and watch as Remington’s face scrunches up in offense. “Excuse me, you can ignore *her*, I’ll have you know that I’m set to inherit-“

“Blah, blah, blah, whatever,” Killian interrupts, face looking bored. “How about we get this party started before they really start fighting, and I can move to where I don’t have to listen to their voices.”

“While I disagree with the second half, I can certainly get behind getting this party started,” Remington approves brightly, seemingly unbothered by the insult.

Ava gives a cheer in agreement, already reaching for a bottle of vodka and working it’s lid off, as Remington tries to yank it from her hands.

I turn back toward Killian, where his bored, neutral expression hasn't changed and allow my eyes to settle on the girl beside him. "Don't you want to introduce me to your new girlfriend?" I ask.

"No," responds Killian.

"Kill," Glyn groans, elbowing him in the side.

"Sorry, little rabbit," Killian says to her, before turning back to me. "No, so don't even look at her for the rest of the night. Better yet, erase her from your mind completely."

Everyone roles their eyes at his possessiveness, especially Glyndon.

"Let's get this party started!" Ava shouts, who appears to have won her small battle with Remington over the vodka, as she holds the half-empty bottle high above her head.

A few yells and cheers come in response, and, we do, in fact, get this party started.

-

It's been a few hours since Gareth and I got here, and honestly? It's not bad. Actually… it's kind of great.

The mansion's warm with laughter and music, low lighting casting soft gold across dark wood and gleaming glass, and everywhere I look, there's someone smiling or dancing lazily or sipping a drink or

halfway through a story I've already missed the beginning of. Ava, Maya and Remi (as I've been told to call him) happily lead the fun by singing and dancing happily in the middle of the room. There's no tension, no expectation, just… comfort. Familiar voices and easy company.

And for once, for the first time in weeks, maybe even months, I feel like I'm breathing without weight pressed against my ribs. Like I'm not bracing for something.

I lean against the marble island in the kitchen, nursing a drink that would make the average person, without my Russian genes, wince. Gareth's perched on a barstool beside me, arguing about something dumb with Killian, while Glyndon hides a smile behind her wine glass as her eyes dart between the two of them. Despite Kill's opposition, I was successfully introduced to the polite and kind Glyndon earlier tonight.

Cecily's dragging Jeremy into a two-step sway near the fireplace, mouthing the lyrics to a song I don't know, and I catch Nikolai spinning Brandon in an exaggerated twirl in the hallway before the two dissolve into laughter.

Even Landon's behaving.

Kind of.

He's stretched out on one of the sofas like he owns it, Mia curled up against him, legs tangled. She rolls her eyes every time he whispers something in her ear and tries not to laugh, but she always does. I haven't observed them together as much as the others, but there's a strange softness in the way she smacks his arm every time he says something ridiculous. It's different to her usual level of sarcasm and confidence.

I haven't thought about Yulian in almost an hour.

It doesn't sound like much, but for me? It's practically a miracle.

And then the fire alarm starts screaming.

The shrill noise rips through the air like a gunshot, jerking everyone's heads up in tandem. Conversation dies instantly. Brandon was mid-spin when he freezes. Cecily flinches and wraps her arms around one of Jeremy's, who doesn't hesitate to pull her protectively toward him. Killian's already got an arm wrapped possessively around Glyn's waist, eyes sharp, and Jeremy doesn't even hesitate to pull his phone out, calling security like it's muscle memory.

A guard barrels in not thirty seconds later, eyes wide. "The annexed house, there's smoke coming from inside. It's on fire."

Dead silence.

All eyes swivel, slowly, toward Landon.

He blinks. Raises both hands innocently. "Oh come on. Seriously?"

Remi raises a brow. "Well…"

"I've been *right here* all night. Literally. Look, ask Mia. I haven't so much as gone to the bathroom."

Mia's eyes narrow, playful but unimpressed. "That's true. He's been glued to my side."

"And," Landon adds, voice rising with theatrical flair, "I've evolved. Grown. I'm reformed."

Nikolai snorts. "Sure, you are."

"I don't know what I could've possibly done to provoke such little faith in me," Landon says with a shrug. "It was practically a century ago. Back before I met my muse and became a changed man."

Even Mia rolls her eyes at that lie.

"You're still as unhinged as ever," Mia mutters, "just a little less murderous with it."

Landon places a hand on his chest. "I find these accusations deeply offensive."

Jeremy aims a not-so-subtle glare at him. "Just shut up, devil incarnate. We know wasn't you. We've already got guards checking the annex." Oddly enough, he sounds a little disappointed.

The alarm is then shut off, once it had been confirmed that the fire was strictly in the annex, leaving behind an echo of silence and several shaken nerves.

Then, Jeremy, Ilya, Nikolai, Killian, Gareth and I all head out to check on the fire. A few of the others claim they should go too, namely Mia and Landon, but we insist some should stay to protect the others just in case the fire wasn't accidental.

-

The cool night air bites at our skin, sharp and bracing against the lingering warmth of the fire's chaos. The annex still smoulders in the distance, though the flames have mostly been subdued, reduced now to crackling embers and occasional hisses of steam as the guards douse the last of it. We move through the smoke-dampened grass, flashlights cutting lines through the darkness. Ilya has gone to join the other guards, while Gareth remains at my left, Jeremy on my right, with Nikolai and Killian close behind, all of us alert and tense, shoulders taut beneath jackets and instincts.

We don't talk much as we approach the wreckage. There's no need. The fire's aftermath speaks for itself. It doesn't take long to realise that this was almost certainly something intentional. Of course, we can't be totally sure so quickly, but so far, all signs point to it. This was meant to send a message.

And a shiver creeps down my spine as I realise, I already know who it's from.

I tell the others I'm going to check the woods behind the annex, brush it off as a precaution. Jeremy starts to offer to come with me, but I wave him off casually. "I'll be two minutes. Just want to make sure no one slipped out through the back."

He nods reluctantly, and I disappear into the tree line.

The second the shadows swallow me, the tightness in my chest tightens further. The air feels heavier here, close and damp, the smell of smoke tangled with bark and earth. I walk quietly, slowly and controlled, each step practiced and smooth, no crunch of twigs, no rustle of leaves, all deliberate and silent. I don't need to draw attention to myself. But I already know it's too late for that.

Something shifts behind me, fast and sharp.

Something's here.

A twig snaps behind me.

Before I can react, a figure launches from the dark and I'm quickly slammed against a tree, hard enough to knock the breath from my lungs. My head cracks against the bark and a sharp pain shoots down my neck. A strong hand claps over my mouth, pinning me in place. My body tenses on instinct, muscles coiling.

And then I smell him.

Yulian.

His breath is hot against my ear. "Did you enjoy my little present?" His voice is a whisper soaked in poison. He's too close, his breath hot against my skin, and there's a sharp glint of satisfaction in his tone that sends a fresh bolt of rage through me.

I shove him back with a roar, and he stumbles a few feet, surprised by the force. But he's barely had time to catch his balance before I'm on him, fists swinging.

The first punch catches him across the jaw with a satisfying crack. He snarls, teeth bared, and swings back. His fist connects with my ribs, knocking the breath from my lungs. We fall into each other, grappling, slamming into trees, rolling through the dirt like animals.

There's no finesse. No tactics. Just raw, burning violence.

I land another hit, split his lip. He knees me in the gut, and I double over. He doesn't wait, driving his shoulder into my stomach and taking us both down in a heap.

We roll again. My hands wrap around his throat. His fingers claw at my wrists. His knee drives into my thigh, his elbow into my side. Pain erupts in flashes, but I don't let go. I squeeze.

You'd think by now, with the number of times we've attacked one another, there would be more rhythm to our violence. But no, it's as crass and chaotic as always, fuelled by rage and frustration.

"You're exactly what I always knew you were," I spit, driving him back with another hit. "A liar. A betrayer. The same piece of shit you were when we were kids."

I had thought Yulian wouldn't be impressed by how we left things last, but this? What if he had set the main house on fire, rather than the annex? Almost every person I care for on this island was in that mansion, and he could have killed them. He would have hurt those I love. *Again*.

He grins psychotically. "Got your attention, didn't it?"

I dig my fingers into his ribs and twist, forcing him off me. We stumble apart, panting, blood on both our mouths now. My heart is thundering, the blood in my ears loud as a drumbeat.

“Actually,” I grin back at him, knowing just where to hit him where it hurts, "you made it easy to forget you existed. You’ve done nothing but lie to me since we were kids. And you think I’m the villain here? You tricked me. You pretended to care. And now you set fire to my fucking house?"

Yulian blocks the next punch and shoves me back, snarling. "That’s rich coming from you, trickster. You waltz in here like you’re still the victim. Like you didn’t abandon me. Again. You’re a fucking coward."

I slam into him, shoulder first, knocking him against another tree. "Don’t pretend you care. You’ve only ever cared about yourself. You think setting fire to my house makes you look powerful? It makes you pathetic."

He laughs, sharp and unhinged. "Don’t pretend you don’t miss me. You felt it that night. I know you did. And then you left. Again. Without a word.”

I freeze. Just for a second.

And he sees it. He pounces.

"That’s right," he hisses, stepping close. "You left me. You used me. You made me think we could finally make it work, and then you vanished. So don’t you dare lecture me about betrayal."

"You don’t get to talk about being used," I bark, jabbing a finger into his chest. "Not after what you did.”

He grabs me by the front of my shirt and drags me close. Our foreheads nearly touch, breathless, wild-eyed, fury like lightning between us.

"And yet you kissed me," he hisses back.

“I was horny. And you were there.”

“You wanted me. You still do.”

“I wanted to kill you.”

He smiles, slow and cruel. "That’s the same thing with us, isn’t it? Love, hate. They bleed together."

I lunge, knocking him off his feet. We land in a heap again, but this time he twists mid-fall, landing on top. He pins me there, eyes wild.

"I’m fed up of this," he growls. "Of waiting for you to make a decision. You never will."

He leans in close to my ear, the heat of his breath against the sharp coolness of the air sending goosebumps all over my body. “As of now, we are enemies again. Truly.”

The words land like a punch to the gut. I should feel triumphant. I don't.

But Yulian isn't finished.

"But then again, we've been enemies for years, Vaughn," he says, voice softer now, twisted with something crueller than anger. "And it never changes the fact that you were mine. That you are mine."

I freeze. Something cold settles in my chest.

He leans in, eyes glinting with something terrible and possessive. "So, listen to me carefully. You keep your hands off anyone on this island. Because if you let anyone touch what's mine, I'll tear them apart, piece by piece. I don't care who they are. What was it you once said? You'd slice them ear to ear? Maybe I'll follow your advice."

I shove him away, panting. "You're insane."

He shrugs, smiling with that familiar, deranged glint in his eye. "Of that I have no doubt. But I warned you. Don't take my words lightly."

"You want to be enemies?" I say, shoving him away and pushing myself upright, ignoring the pain in my side. "Fine. Then we're enemies. But I'm not done with you. Not by a long shot. You'd better be ready. I don't take threats to my family's life lightly."

He grins, all teeth. "Good. I love it when you fight."

And then he turns and disappears into the shadows, the trees swallowing him whole.

I stand there, fists clenched at my sides, chest heaving. I should chase after him. I should scream. I should do something.

But I just stare into the dark.

If he wants to be enemies? Fine. Then we're enemies. But this isn't over.

He thinks setting fire to a house is war? He has no idea. I'll make him pay. I'll make him feel every bit of the betrayal he carved into my skin. And as for his warning?

He had better follow his own demands. Because in return, if I find anyone has touched him, I certainly will go through with my threats.

This isn't over. Not even close.

This is just the beginning.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed <3.
this chap was very much a struggle to write as i found the scene introducing everyone to vaughn pretty difficult cause i obviously wanted to get all their characterisations right, but, for some characters especially, it has been a very long time since i read their book, and some characters are harder to understand than others. i hope no one felt super out of character for you.

ill probably do a bigger run down on the chap tommorrow on my tumblr like last time its lucsf19 if you didnt already know :).
speaking of, thanks for all of the love and questions on there, it means a lot!
it is now 1:35 so im gunna go to bed.
thanks for the support as always <3.

Chapter Sixteen

Chapter Notes

hi!
i dont really have much to say, but enjoy this chap <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

The midday sun filters lazily through the cloud cover, casting a diffuse golden haze across the university campus as I stroll beside Annie, her footsteps light against the concrete, her voice weaving soft commentary about her latest project.

My attention has drifted away, not because I don't care, but because my attention has been hijacked by a sensation I know too well. That subtle chill against the back of my neck, the unmistakable weight of a gaze that doesn't just observe - it dissects. I slow slightly, the corners of my mouth twitching into a smile that is all teeth and anticipation.

Vaughn.

My eyes flicker across the open space with casual nonchalance, trained to scan without alerting suspicion, but the moment I see the man on the matte-black motorcycle parked across the street, helmet visor down, arms crossed, posture relaxed yet taut with predatory restraint, I know. Even with his face obscured, his presence radiates like a storm waiting to break.

The machine he straddles is sleek, aggressive and absurdly expensive. Exactly the kind of beast Vaughn should ride (other than me, of

course). I could feel him watching me before I even spotted him.

I bite the inside of my cheek to contain the delight bubbling up inside me.

I keep walking, my expression unreadable to the casual observer, but a firestorm whirls beneath my skin. The chaos of it all, the fact that he’s here, unannounced, watching me from the shadows, sends a thrill through me so sharp I feel the hairs on my skin rise. I want him to react. I want him to break his own rules. And more than anything, I want to remind him what it feels like to want something you shouldn’t.

And then, as Annie's voice filters back into my mind, an idea hits me.

I glance at her. Her dark curls bounce as she talks, fingers gesturing animatedly about something to do with her course. She’s beautiful, sharp, composed. And more importantly, she’s standing right next to me. The same girl Vaughn has expressed his jealousy over again and again. Whose constant presence around me has frustrated him repeatedly. I've insisted that she is just a friend, a work colleague, if anything, but maybe I can now show him otherwise. It’s perfect.

I stop walking suddenly, causing Annie to pause mid-sentence and shoot me a questioning look. We’re near one of the quieter brick walls on the edge of campus, a convenient little alcove tucked just out of direct view. Vaughn’s vantage point is ideal. I press my hand to the wall above Annie’s head, leaning in close, close enough that anyone watching might think I’m about to kiss her.

"You know," I murmur, my voice low and heavy with calculated charm, "you look exceptionally beautiful today. Do you always style your hair in that way?"

Annie raises an eyebrow, unamused but clearly playing along. "Don't be delusional, Dimitriev, I always look this beautiful."

I smirk, tilting my head just enough to block the angle Vaughn might have on her face, keeping the intimacy suggestive. I can feel the tension rolling off that motorbike like a second sun. He's watching. I know he's watching. And I want him boiling with it.

"You know I know he's out there, right?" she says suddenly, voice pitched low. The smile vanishes from my face for a heartbeat. I pull back just slightly, eyes narrowing.

"Excuse me?"

Annie's lips twist into a knowing grin. "The biker. Helmet on, testosterone raging so strongly I can practically smell it? You're clearly putting on a show for him, and I just thought I'd let you know - it's pretty obvious."

I blink. She sees through it. Fuck.

"You're more perceptive than I give you credit for," I mutter, momentarily thrown. None the less, I keep the playful grin on my face.

She shrugs, though a similar flirty grin spreads her mouth, "maybe that's something you should work on." It seems, despite catching onto my little game, she is more than happy to go along with it.

I glance over her shoulder just in time to hear the motorbike engine roar to life. Then, without a look back, he drives away. Vaughn doesn't charge across the courtyard. He doesn't come up to start a fight or rip me away from Annie like I thought he might. He just… drives away. Smooth, casual and cold.

I blink again, genuinely surprised. No tantrum. No storming over. No fists. He always seems to react with such strong, instant rage. Sometimes, as if he can't even control it. Is he really just going to return home after what he just saw, no bother in the slightest?

The sensation in my chest is ugly, twisting. I wanted a reaction. I wanted fire. I gave him a flame and he snuffed it out. It doesn't sit right. It gnaws at me, raking claws against my ribs. Why didn't he come over? Why didn't he even flinch? He can't be done with me, not so soon, not so easily.

No, that doesn't track.

He wouldn't have come all the way here if he didn't still care. He must be playing games again. Trying to get the upper hand. Pretending indifference like it won't kill him inside. But I see through it.

"You alright?" Annie asks casually, giving me an easy out of the situation, a chance for her to forget this happened. Though, her head stares in the direction the bike zoomed off in.

I grit my teeth, flash her a smile. "Never better."

But inside, a new kind of madness is starting to brew.

-

Vaughn

-

My room is a fucking mess.

My knuckles are split open and there's blood smeared across the side of the dresser, along with the deep gouges my boot left in the wood panel when I kicked it in half an hour ago. The mattress has been flipped, sheets hanging half off the bed frame like the aftermath of some violent storm, no, not some storm. Me. I'm the fucking storm.

I'm pacing. I've been pacing for what feels like forever. Rage coils inside me like smoke in a sealed room, thick and choking, nowhere to go. My chest rises and falls with ragged, uneven breaths, and the sting in my hands is the only thing tethering me to the moment. That and the wreckage I've left in my wake.

Drawers ripped out and flung across the floor. The lamp my mother got for me as a housewarming gift - shattered. Glass crunches underfoot as I move again, restless and livid, unsure where to throw all of this heat that's boiling beneath my skin.

I saw him. I saw him with her.

Annie. Of all fucking people.

The same bastard who stood in the woods only a few days ago, towering over me, body pressed against mine, and told me -warned me- not to let anyone touch me. Who said I was his. His.

And then he has the audacity to turn around and cozy up to her?

The thing is, I'm not an idiot. After I'd seen them together enough, I did my research. I actually believe him, still, that she is just a friend, her driven nature doesn't seem very compatible with being the type to sleep with her boss. Which means that he put that little show on just to piss me off.

And judging by the state of my room, it worked. I don't even know how I held it together long enough to drive out of there which such composure. My hands were gripping the handlebars of my bike so tight I thought they might break. All I could do was focus on how I didn't want to give him the satisfaction of seeing the reaction I knew he craved.

I snarl and grab the closest thing to me, some ceramic mug I didn't even know I owned, and hurl it at the wall. It smashes spectacularly, fragments skittering across the floor in a sparkling, chaotic scatter that suits the moment.

He wasn't even being hypocritical. He was being calculating.

He knew I'd be watching. He wanted me to. That little performance? The way he leaned in, with what I'm sure was a low-voice and smug expression, putting on a show like I wouldn't notice?

God, I could rip him apart.

The door creaks open without a knock. Wrong move.

Without thinking, I grab the nearest object, a glass paperweight, and whirl around, flinging the object in my hand like a missile, only just registering a shape in the doorway.

“Shit-” Gareth ducks with a grunt, the object slamming into the doorframe just above his head. He stares at me, wide-eyed, then slowly surveys the room with a raised brow and absolutely zero self-preservation instinct.

“Well,” he says, stepping fully inside, carefully avoiding the broken glass, “and here I thought I took the cake for biggest crashout when it came to a man.”

I snap.

“There is no fucking man,” I spit, the words flung from my mouth like venom, like fire, like something jagged I’ve been holding in for too long. My vision is tinged red, rage flooding all logic, all restraint. “And I’m not crashing out.”

I charge him before I even know what I’m doing, pent up anger flooding through me with nowhere to go, nowhere but the closest moving target.

But Gareth is faster than he looks, sidestepping me with ease and shoving a hand into my chest, forcing space between us.

“Vaughn. Calm the fuck down,” he says, serious now, eyes hard. “You’re not thinking straight. You know what’s happening right now and you need to calm. Down.”

“You don’t know shit.”

I take a shaky breath, fists still clenched at my sides, knuckles aching. Gareth lowers his arms, no longer in defence, and cautiously approaches again. His gaze drifts once more over the wreckage of my room, splintered wood, torn fabric, books scattered like a bomb went off.

"Hey," he says, his voice low, steady, like I might be a wild animal he's trying to coax down from a ledge. "You're breathing too fast. Come on, slow it down. In… and out. In… and out."

I resist at first, stubbornness twisting in my gut, but eventually I mimic him. In through the nose, slow and steady, out through the mouth. I do it again. And again. The storm in my chest doesn't vanish, but it ebbs. The fire doesn't go out, but it stops flaring into an inferno.

When my shoulders finally sag a little, Gareth nods and gently nudges me toward the bed, or what's left of it, at least. We both sit, side by side, and for a long stretch of silence he says nothing. He's good at that, waiting until I'm ready, never rushing me to speak before I'm steady enough to do it.

After a moment, he breaks the silence. "What the hell happened to get you like this, Vaughn? I haven't seen you spiral like that in… shit, years. I thought you were past this."

I stare at the cracked floor tile between my feet. I want to speak. I don't.

He pauses, waiting, then sighs. "It was Yulian, wasn't it?"

The second his name hits the air, my jaw clenches hard enough to hurt, and the rage threatens to spike again, hot and dizzying behind my eyes.

"Don't-" I rasp, my voice hoarse. "Don’t say his name."

Gareth holds up his hands in surrender. “Alright. Fine. I won’t.”

He leans forward, forearms on his knees, eyes scanning the destruction again. “But is this about him?” His tone is gentler now, or as gentle as Gareth is capable of sounding. Less like someone trying to pry, more like someone trying to help pick up the pieces.

I almost tell him. I almost let it spill, the entire thing. About how I saw Yulian with Annie. Again. That he did it knowing I’d be there, knowing I’d watch. That he smiled through it, like it was a fucking game. That I felt something inside me crack all over again, in that exact same place he’s broken before. And that the worst part is, I still want him, even after everything. After all the warnings, after all the destruction.

I’ve been alright over the winter, trying to keep him out of my mind, being so far away. But since I’ve come back? Been in such close proximity to him constantly? I’ve dreamt about our last night together almost every night. His skin, his breath, the way his body moved against mine. I’ve woken up with my cock hard, practically on the edge of release, from how desperately I want to recreate that night over and over.

I even miss talking to him. My thoughts often drift back to that small timeframe when we were messaging often, talking about everything and nothing. I miss his overly flirtatious nature and how he never faltered in his confidence when it came to telling me just how much he wants me. I may have rolled my eyes at it or ignored it altogether, but it’s only with fondness that I think of those moments where things between us seemed so much simpler.

And sometimes, in my darkest moments when I let the memories of him truly overwhelm me, I think of the basement. I think of the nights we stayed up talking. I think about the games we played and the chats we had. I think of him telling me about his mother and sister, and how I could tell just how much love he has for them, by the way he spoke of them.

Even though it ended up all being a lie, a trick.

I may have resigned myself to knowing that we can never be together, even ignoring all the issues that come with us being heirs to the empires we are, due to the history of lies and deception that are rooted in that basement. But that doesn't stop me from wanting him. From missing him.

I can mask my feelings with the need for revenge, the need to keep up with this ongoing war between us. But I know, deep down, that it is simply an excuse to revisit him, over and over. Torturing myself with someone I can never have.

But I don't tell Gareth any of this.

Because despite how much Gareth and I relied on each other, even through online personas, for months, Gareth is settled now. He's not spiralling, caught up in someone he can never make it work with, not anymore. Not like me.

He's with Kayden now. He's happy and comfortable and secure. He's found something real, something stable, something genuine that doesn't claw into him like broken glass. And I can't, won't, drag him into this pit with me. He deserves to be okay. He deserves to breathe without inhaling my poison.

So, I lie.

“You’re wrong,” I mutter, staring at the floor. “Just had a bad day.”

He doesn't respond right away. I know he knows I’m full of shit. I can feel it in the silence that stretches too long, in the way he exhales slowly through his nose like he wants to call me out but chooses not to.

“Okay,” he says finally, standing. He dusts off his jeans and glances down at me, something like quiet understanding softening his features.

“But if you ever want to talk about… your bad day,” he says, deliberately vague, “I’m here.” He walks to the door, steps around the mess with the care of someone used to tiptoeing through other people’s wreckage.

Just before he leaves, he glances over his shoulder. “You’re my best friend, dude. You don’t always have to bleed alone.”

Then the door clicks shut behind him, leaving me in the ruins of my room, and the weight of everything I didn’t say.

I inhale a deep breath as my mind seems to truly, finally clear of the foggy mess that had overtaken it the moment I saw Yulian close in on Annie. My eyes dart around my destroyed bedroom, and I sigh, knowing that it is entirely my own fault I no longer have a bed to sleep in tonight.

Gareth’s right. I *am* supposed to be better. But now look.

I consider my next move. I know I can't stay away from him. Following him around on the bike my parents got me as a Christmas gift is a clear sign for that. But as I said before, I can't be with him, and after our last few meetings, even though he still tells me to stay away from others, I'm not entirely sure Yulian wants to be with me.

So, I'll just keep doing what I'm doing. Masking my true feelings with revenge.

Revenge.

-

Yulian

-

I'm lying on the couch, one arm draped over my eyes, the other limp at my side, the glow of afternoon sunlight bleeding lazily through the blinds in thick golden stripes across the ceiling. The house is too quiet, except for my thoughts, which are never quiet, never still. They're always screaming. Always circling back to the same goddamn place like a whirlpool that won't let me up for air.

Vaughn.

It's like he's branded into the inside of my skull. Well, actually, like he's branded on my chest, which he is. I constantly think about his mouth, the last night, the way he whispered and moaned my name like he hated it, like he loved it, like he was begging for it and cursing it at the same time. It replays in my mind every time I close my eyes, every time I touch myself, every time I breathe a little too deep and remember how he smelled.

He didn’t react. That’s the part I can’t shake. He saw me with Annie, and he didn’t react. Just sat there on that gorgeous, purring machine of his like a statue carved from smug indifference, and then he left. Without a word. Without a fire. Without that rage I’ve come to crave like it’s a drug I can't detox from.

It’s not right. It's not like him. I *wanted* him to come storming over, rip me off her like a madman and put his hands around my throat, or hers, or both, something violent and unhinged and twisted. Something real. Because at least when Vaughn is angry, I *know* he still feels something for me. But with that blackout visor he had on and the stillness of his body, I have no clue what he was thinking in that moment.

It’s fucking *unnerving.*

I run a hand through my hair, nails biting into my scalp, chewing the inside of my cheek raw while my mind loops through every possible reason why he didn’t take the bait. It better not be because someone else has his attention. Or maybe it should be. It’s been way too long since I got my hands bloody.

Before I can spiral any further, the door slams open with the chaotic energy of a hurricane in sneakers, and my sister bursts into the room like she owns it, which, to be fair, she sort of does now. I’ve made it very clear to my men who the lady of the house is. She’s got an oven mitt on one hand and her phone in the other, beaming a bright smile at me.

“*Cookies are ready!*” she announces, practically vibrating, cheeks flushed pink from the heat of the kitchen. “Come and try one before they go cold. The chocolate chips are all melted and absolutely perfect!”

I lift my head off the couch, arching an eyebrow. “You baked?” I ask, genuinely confused. “Where the hell did you get the ingredients?”

It’s probably for the best I didn’t know we had them, or else those chocolate chips would have been eaten well before she got the chance to even think about baking.

She rolls her eyes and thrusts her phone closer to my face like that answers everything. “I found a recipe on TikTok and went shopping. I’ve been trying to explore as much of the island as possible and figured the supermarket was a good place to start. You gonna complain or eat one, asshole?”

I grin, standing and stretching like a cat, bones popping, muscles sore, everything inside me still humming with the static of unsatisfied obsession. “Oh, *definitely* gonna eat one. As if I’d ever give up the chance to eat my favourite sister’s amazing bakes.”

“Correct answer.” She grins and drags me into the kitchen, bouncing on her toes, practically glowing with that blinding, naive joy that seems to be contagious, with the way the I seem to match the feeling. If there is one thing that can always make me smile, it’s my sister. I couldn’t be more grateful my father allowed her to come here; I’ve never seen or heard her so happy.

The cookies smell great and when I bite into one, I groan loudly.

Because it’s fucking *perfect*.

“You’re joking,” I mumble through a mouthful, eyes wide. “You actually made these with your gremlin hands?”

She slaps my arm. “Don’t be rude! And yes. I’m amazing. You’re welcome.”

I take another bite, slower this time. “Okay, fine. I’m impressed. Chicago has officially lost a baking genius.”

My surprise at her baking ability is sarcastic, which we both know. My sister is a pretty terrible cook. She always has been and always will be, but she and I used to bake a lot together when we were younger and we have grown to be quite good at it. Though, she definitely exceeds my skill, especially with a select few treats. Like these cookies, for example.

Tati grins, cheeks puffing out. “I’m so glad I got to come here,” she says, a little softer now, voice dipping into something more genuine. “I knew it would be so much better here. Being with you. Being away from him. It’s like I can breathe again. Like I can actually *do* stuff, *try* stuff, and not be told no every five seconds. You know?”

I nod, still chewing. But I do know. That’s why I came here in the first place two years ago. Partly also because of the Heathens being here, but also because Chicago was claws. Expectations. Control.

Here, at least for now, there’s space. For her to break free and figure out who exactly she wants to be, something more than just a mafia princess whose always been locked up in her tower.

“I want to go out,” she says, dropping the oven mitt on the counter. “Explore more of the island. I haven’t seen anything except the university and some shops.”

I arch an eyebrow. “You want me to take you sightseeing?”

“Um, I’m giving you the unforgettable opportunity to spend the evening with the best sister in the world? Come on, Yules, I’m letting you be the cool older brother for once. Don’t blow it.”

I laugh under my breath. “Wow. My lifelong dream.”

But I see the excitement in her eyes, and I can’t say no. Not when she’s finally getting to *live*. Not when she finally feels safe to do so.

“Fine,” I say. “It’s getting late and will be dark soon, but there’s a café that stays open pretty late that sells some really good pastries. Not as good as yours, though, obviously.”

Her face lights up. “Keep giving me compliments like that and you might just find a pretty constant flow of perfectly baked goods at your disposal.”

“Jokes on you, that was my plan all along.” I wink at her as she giggles.

I shake my head and finish another cookie in two bites, watching her dart back toward her room to change, already buzzing with plans.

And for a second, just one, I manage to forget the itch under my skin. The burning need to go find Vaughn and set something on fire just to watch the smoke reflect in his eyes. I forget the twisted chess game we keep playing, the knives we call affection, the scars we pretend aren’t still bleeding.

-

We've been at the café for over two hours, and my leg still won't stop bouncing under the table. It's not the caffeine, though I'm pretty sure I've had enough to kill the average human, but the weight of what sits at the back of my mind. It feels like I'm waiting for something, but I don't know what.

The night sky is now devoid of any blue; a simple blackness scattered with stars now stretching out above. It's not especially late, but being winter still, the night comes earlier.

Tati, meanwhile, is oblivious to my spiralling. She's stretched out in the booth across from me, one leg tucked under her, scrolling through her phone and occasionally shoving the last remnants of her banana bread into her mouth with the kind of joy that makes me vaguely jealous, but mostly just content. She's been glowing all afternoon. Like sunshine in human form.

"You good?" she asks, glancing up and catching the thousand-yard stare I've been zoning into my cold latte.

I blink. Smile. Lie. "Yeah. Just thinking."

She narrows her eyes but doesn't push, because she knows better. Instead, she claps her hands once and says, "One more drink before we go?"

"Sure," I say, sliding out of the booth. "You lead. I'll follow."

The place is still packed despite the late time of day and darkness outside; it really is a favourite spot for the locals. We weave through the tables, heading for the counter, but just as we reach the end of the line, Tati turns too quickly.

And *crashes* into someone.

There's a splatter of movement, a sharp inhale, and then the sound of a paper cup hitting the floor. Brown liquid splashes up the poor girl's white shirt, soaking it through.

"Oh my God, I am *so sorry!*" Tati gasps, already grabbing napkins from the counter and trying to dab away the coffee that as certainly already stained. "I wasn't looking, shit, I'm so sorry-"

The girl's wide-eyed for a second, startled, as her eyes catch on me for a second too long, then quickly recovers with a shaky laugh. Clearly, she knows who I am. "No, it's okay, really. I should've seen you coming. Happens all the time."

It's not unusual for someone to recognise me. Other than my gorgeous looks, I'm Yulian Dimitriev, leader of the Serpents. Of course, people recognise me. However, as I'm watching them with mild amusement, my eyes actually *focus* on the girl, and there's something familiar about her. I can't place it. I think it's her face, but I'm not entirely too sure.

I tilt my head, scanning her.

Tati is still fussing, grabbing the girl's hand now and shaking it. "I'm Tati. And I'm *definitely* buying you another drink. It's the least I owe after ruining your shirt like that."

“Oh, no, really, it’s fine,” the girl laughs, brushing hair behind her ear. She looks half embarrassed, half-tempted to run.

That’s when my phone rings. I glance at the screen. Mikhail.

Shit.

“Be right back,” I mutter, already turning toward the back wall and pressing the phone to my ear.

“What?”

“There’s been an incident at the mansion,” Mikhail says, voice sharp. “You need to come back. Now.”

My spine goes straight. “What kind of incident?”

“We’ll talk when you get here. Everything is under control now. No current danger. But it’s better to explain in person.”

“I’m on my way.”

I hang up. My stomachs already coiled. That old instinct, deep and familiar, flares up fast. Danger, blood and excitement. The usual. I hope blood is involved. I did say it’s been too long since I’ve gotten any on my hands.

I spin back around to find Tati and Jessie still talking. Jessie looks like she's trying to politely escape while Tati is doubling down on her apology with the force of a hurricane. I step in.

"Tati. We have to go."

She turns, blinking. Then I see the realization in her expression. Her face goes still for half a second. She knows the tone. She's heard it enough growing up.

"Something with our family?" she asks softly.

"Yeah."

She nods once. "Okay. You go. I'll stay and get Jessie here another drink. We're exchanging info anyway. I need to sort out dry cleaning or something. New clothes or whatever."

I glance between the two of them. Jessie still looks vaguely shell-shocked but is too polite to argue, and I know Tati. Once she gets a grip on a cause, apology or otherwise, she doesn't let go. And truthfully, I can tell what this really is: she's trying to make a friend. A *real* one. The kind who wasn't paid off or connected to our world or watching us for the wrong reasons.

She wants to be normal. And she's *trying*.

I sigh. "Fine. But you *text* me. Updates. Everywhere you go. And let me know when you're ready to come back, I'll send someone to pick you up. No walking alone or taxis."

Tati grins. “Yes, *Dad*.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.” She gives me a quick hug, then turns back to Jessie, already dragging her toward the counter again. Jessie shoots me one last unsure glance, and I offer the smallest smirk I can manage, just to let her know the hurricane she’s just been swept into isn’t entirely malevolent.

I head for the door.

Just as I push it open, I hear laughter echoing behind me. Loud, bright, and unexpected. Both girls, Tati and Jessie, are cracking up over something. The sound carries past me and into the street like a warm wind. It seems Jessie got over her awkwardness pretty quick, and they’ll hopefully become fast friends.

I’ll have a little background check done, of course. She’s still my baby sister after all.

I smile.

Then I walk away, back to the mansion and ready for whatever I’ve got waiting for me there.

-

By the time I get back to the mansion, the driveway’s swarming with

men in black.

There's broken glass scattered across the living room, all of the plants are in pieces, and two guards are muttering in low, panicked Russian while cleaning up something sticky from the tiles. Wine that seems to have been taken from the kitchen and smashed across the room. It stains.

The air buzzes with tension, like someone's been screaming and just stopped a second before I walked in. My jaw ticks as I make my way past the wreckage of a shattered vase I know cost more than most people make in a month. Not stolen. Just broken. *Smashed,* really. Like it offended whoever did this just by existing.

Mikhail's by the staircase, arms crossed, barking orders like a man who's trying not to show he has no fucking clue what's going on.

"Mikhail," I say, stepping into his line of sight. "What the hell happened?"

He turns, expression grim. "Someone got in."

"Got in?" I echo, lifting a brow. "Into *here?*"

He nods once. "We don't know who. Or how. No one saw anything. No alarms were triggered. Nothing was taken, but…" He gestures around. "They made a pretty big fucking mess."

He isn't exaggerating. The place looks like someone walked through with a bat and a grudge.

“We’ve cleared every room,” he goes on, “and there’s no sign of anyone now. But the breach is real. We’re working on tracing how they got in.”

I nod slowly, mind racing. No theft. No signs of forced entry. Just destruction. A message, clearly. But saying what?

“Have someone ready to pick up Tati when she calls,” I say. “I’ll be in my room.”

Mikhail nods without question.

I take the stairs two at a time, heart beating a little faster now. Not fear. *Excitement.*

Because I have a theory. And if I’m right…

I reach my bedroom door, twist the handle, and step inside.

It’s *freezing.*

Not in a reference to feeling wrong or disturbed, but literally freezing.

My eyes flick to the window. Wide open. In winter, it’s no wonder my room is this cold.

And just like that, I know.

That's why they didn't find anything. That's how he got in. The guards swept every inch of this place, *except* here. My bedroom. The one room no one but me ever touches without permission.

I step inside, slow, deliberate, eyes scanning the shadows, the carpet, the furniture.

Then I see it.

The wall across from the bed.

My pulse slows. My breath catches.

Well, I did say I wanted to get my hands bloody. This isn't quite what I had in mind, but I'll take it.

It's written in jagged strokes, smeared and deliberate. *Blood.* Crimson letters against white paint. The handwriting is messy. Sharp. Furious.

The next time a pair of hands that aren't mine touch you, I'll deliver them in a box.

– V.

I stare at it for a long, quiet moment.

Then grin.

It spreads slow, creeping up like heat through my veins. My stomach twists with something feral. He *was* here.

He broke in. Into *my* house. Again!

A threat. A promise.

And all I can think is-

Finally.

I drag a hand through my hair, laughing once under my breath. It echoes off the cold walls, sharp and wild and a little too loud.

This is what I wanted. His reaction that I craved, that he initially refused to give me. But this makes the wait entirely worth it. I suppose I'll have to keep away from Annie for a little while. Using her in mine and Vaughn's game is fun and all, but unfortunately, as my computer expert, I do need to her retain her hands as they are quite vital in operating a computer.

And I have no doubt Vaughn is entirely real with his threat.

Game on.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed. I quite like how this chap came out, i had a lot

of fun writing yulian and tati together. you also hopefully recognised a familiar name.
this is a slight spoiler, but vaughn is going to (evetually) have a nickname for yulian, and there is a poll on my tumblr (lucsf19) about what it will be. its between two and ive given an explanation for why both could work, if you want it to be a surprise, do avoid it, but if you would like to vote in it, please do <3
thanks for all the love and support <3

Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Notes

hi. erm, this is kind of a big one, lol.
enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

My new car smells like scorched leather and old money. Exactly how I like it.

It's matte black (to match with a certain someone. I hope he notices). Sleek enough to loudly announce my arrogance to the world. And very clearly expensive enough to make a statement. And the statement is: *fuck you, I'm back*.

It's been a couple days since my last car decided to make a dramatic exit.

Correction: Vaughn decided it for me. He very publicly set my previous car alight, right on campus for all to see. After being burnt to an absolute crisp, melted down and causing enough damage that Kayden actually reached out to insist we stop fighting so publicly because it's 'stressing his precious baby boy out' and 'distracting them from fucking twenty-four-seven'.

Okay, he didn't actually say that. He just grumbled and threatened that we stop costing the University so much money with our antics and avoid doing such things where the older Carson can see because he's apparently worried about his bestie. But what I said was

definitely implied.

Don’t know how they even fuck at his old age. You’d think his dick must be permanently limp by now considering he’s like sixty or something.

Anyway, Mikhail’s practically been having an aneurysm since it happened. He’s always on the phone, shout-whispering to whoever, probably bitching about all the stress I’m causing him. I nearly killed half the security team when it first happened, until I realised who did it, and then I just got excited.

Because of course it was him. Of course he burned it.

He’d warned me, though I wouldn’t call the way he growled *"Mess with my business again and I’ll tear your whole world apart"* a legal notice. Still. Fair’s fair.

He burned my car to pay me back for sabotaging his first little diplomatic debut. The one where he was supposed to charm a few British businessmen into forming a little under-the-table trade alliance. Unfortunately for him, I may have sent an anonymous tip about the police being onto them the night before, and they pulled back pretty quickly after that.

What can I say? I was bored. And I wanted to see if he’d sweat.

He did. Beautifully.

Anyway, I can’t allow all the gossip to continue. People all over the island are talking about how *the* Yulian Dimitriev’s car was destroyed,

though no one knows by who, and I hasn't bothered to do anything about it. They're saying I'm weak, gone soft. So, I need to reassert myself as the psychopathic asshole everyone knows I am.

And the first step is to show off this new beauty.

I pull into the driveway of my mansion and note how my guards' mouths drop open at the sight of my Ferrari. Their eyes trail over it, practically drooling over her exquisiteness. Without sparing them a look, I jump out and head inside.

My footsteps echo across the marble floor as I toss the keys to the new car into the glass bowl by the door – a ridiculous piece of art Tati bought, shaped like a cracked skull, some statement about beauty in destruction.

Probably something else she found on 'TikTok', she's utterly obsessed, I swear.

I'm still grinning when I find Mikhail in the main hall, standing by the weapons cabinet, running a polishing cloth over the barrel of a rifle that doesn't need polishing. He does this when he's annoyed. When he's waiting to speak but doesn't want to say the first word because he doesn't want to be disrespectful. When he wants *me* to ask.

I don't give him the satisfaction.

"I need his schedule," I say instead, slipping off my gloves and tucking them into my coat pocket. "All of it. Classes, professors, societies, if he's picked up a Pilates class on Tuesdays, I want to know."

Mikhail stops polishing. Doesn't look up. "Schedule for who?"

I arch a brow. "Don't be dense."

He sets the rifle down with a quiet, deliberate clunk, then finally meets my eyes. "I assume you mean Vaughn."

"Obviously."

There's a beat of silence, long enough to let the weight settle, not long enough to make it awkward. He doesn't ask why. He's heard about the chaos around campus that's been happening, and he knows who's behind it. After his latest stunt, I need to cover all bases to come up with my next retaliation in our war. And knowing where he is at all times is the best place to start.

"Yes, Boss," he says eventually, voice like gravel under boots. The fact he called me Boss means he isn't happy about it, though. He's doing it because it's his job, not because he wants to.

"Drop the fucking attitude, Mikhail." I grunt, moving toward the drinks cabinet. I don't need a drink, but I pour one anyway. Something about the ritual of it, the sound of liquid meeting glass, the smooth glide of crystal across polished wood, always steadies me.

"I said I would do it," Mikhail mutters.

I sip once, savouring the burn down my throat. "Good. Don't take long. It's my turn to unleash the next phase of our war after he destroyed my car. I don't want to leave him waiting."

There's another pause, but it's heavier this time, laced with the tension that precedes something inevitable. I feel it stretch between us like a tightrope, fraying at the centre.

Finally, he speaks again. "Yulian."

I hum in response, noncommittal.

"You going to tell me what this is really about?"

I don't turn around. "I don't think that's for you to question. Do not think our friendship constitutes you to question me."

"Please," he rolls his eyes, and the sarcasm is obvious, but I can tell it's on purpose. "I've been questioning you our entire lives, all with the intention of having your back. You've never cared before it was about Morozov."

My hand tightens around my drink, and I take a sip again. Let the silence stretch.

Mikhail steps closer, voice low now, but firm. "Is there something I should know?"

I finally glance back over my shoulder. "No."

But even I hear the lie in my voice. It rings clear as a cracked bell.

He studies me. Doesn't push. Just *waits*.

And then, quietly, almost like it's an afterthought: "What's going to happen when he finds out that you killed Camilla? That her death wasn't a suicide?"

The name hits harder than the question. It's not like she's exactly the first or last person I've killed and then staged as a suicide, but she is the only one who dated Vaughn for years, only to get dumped after she cheated on him with me.

It's not that I've forgotten about her, but more that I've just pushed her to the back of my mind. Her death feels like a lifetime ago now, something no longer relevant in the grand scheme of things. However, I suppose I wasn't the one that knew her for half my life and dated her for the other half.

"He won't," I say, and I don't bother dressing it up with lies or explanations.

"But if he does-"

"He won't." Sharper now. Final. "Because we are the only two people alive that know, Mikhail. And I certainly won't tell him. Are you saying I should doubt you?"

Mikhail exhales through his nose, not quite a sigh, not quite defeat. "Don't do that, Yulian. You know damn well how deep my loyalty to you runs. You say no one other than us will ever know? Fine. They wouldn't even be able to torture it out of me."

I let out a breath I hadn't realised I was holding. He's right. Mikhails been my closest friend for as long as I can remember. He's loyal to a fault. It wasn't that I truly doubted him, just that my mind tends to fog over when it comes to Vaughn.

"I know," I say.

Mikhail says nothing. Even though he won't ever give my secrets away, I know he doesn't approve of them. I doubt he ever will. And he's not one to sugarcoat his words in order to avoid upsetting me. It's one of the reasons we've always gotten along, and why he's my top guard.

"I want that timetable within a couple days."

He nods once.

-

Vaughn

-

The lecture wraps with the same dull echo of overcomplicated charts and a professor who tries way too hard to act like he's 'down with the kids', as he likes to phrase it. I close my laptop before he even finishes his final sentence. Mia's already halfway out of her chair.

"Come on," she mutters, stuffing her tablet into her bag. "Before someone asks a question and he keeps us here another ten minutes to answer it like he's presenting to the goddamn UN."

I follow her out, cutting through the rows of half-asleep students blinking against fluorescent lights like they've just emerged from a bunker. The hallway outside is cooler, and the crowd disperses in that easy campus rhythm, no one really in a hurry, no one really caring. However, they still seem to subtly make way for us, moving out of our way rather than us moving out of theirs. It's always helpful being me.

Maya's waiting just past the entrance, arms crossed, though she quickly jumps up and gives me a hug when she spots us walking toward her. She gives the same to Mia, though it's a little more strained. They still seem to have a hint of awkwardness, though they are working hard to repair their relationship.

So far, though, they still tend to need at least one other person with them to act as a buffer.

"Where's G?" I ask as I put her back on her feet. The four of us had planned on hanging out after our lecture.

"Getting laid," she says bluntly. "Apparently that was more important than seeing his friends today."

Mia snorts. "Says the girl who disappears every time a certain tall Russian walks into the room. Ilya around anywhere?"

"Shut up," Maya fires back, but she's grinning now, even if she tries to hide it behind an eyeroll. If anything, I think she's just happy her sister is engaging in banter with her.

The three of us head down the steps, out into the weak winter sunlight. The sky's washed-out white, and the air has a gentle stillness

to it.

Mia's phone buzzes. One glance and her whole face shifts, smirk curling at her mouth, cheeks gone pink like she's not trying to hide it in the slightest.

"Oh my *god*," Maya groans. "Is *everyone's* horniness set to max today?"

Mia doesn't look up. "Don't be jealous, Maya. I'm sure Ilya will help you out later."

"I *will* trip you."

"You could try."

Mia pockets her phone and throws us a breezy smile. "Gotta go. Apparently, Landon has a very urgent question that requires my attention."

I raise an eyebrow. "Mia," I say, deadpan. "I can't believe you would just abandon us like this to see Landon King of all people. Betrayal of the finest form."

She flips me off without slowing down. "Keep mourning. I'll be busy."

And then it's just me and Maya, walking toward the quieter edge of campus, where the trees get thicker and fewer people bother to go. We find a bench just off the path, half-shielded by bare branches and an old stone wall no one's repaired in years.

I sit first. She follows.

Out here, the world dulls. No footsteps, no traffic, no pointless conversation drifting in from all directions. Just us and the cold and the distant hum of life we've chosen to step away from.

I lean back, elbows on my knees.

"Surprised you didn't kill either of them for ditching," I say.

"I considered it," she says casually, as if she truly means it. "But then I realised, without them here, we can have The OT."

"The OT?" I repeat, raising an eyebrow.

She nods her head and pulls her phone from her pocket. When I see her click on her contacts, I immediately know what she's talking about, and I can't stop a grin from spreading across my mouth.

The OT.

I completely forgot we used to call ourselves that, meaning 'The Original Trio'. We just thought it sounded cooler initalised. When all of us were young, while we've always all been close friends, there were obviously some that were closer than others. And while the others took a couple extra years to figure out who they were and weren't closest to, Maya, Lidya and I formed our close friendship almost immediately.

Of course, Lidya and I were close first, being cousins who were born in very close proximity, and then we were raised practically as siblings. But it didn't take us long to adopt Maya into our little group.

The phone doesn't ring long before she answers.

"Maya!" Lidya's chipper voice comes through the phone. Though shy with those she doesn't know well, much like her mother in that regard, Lidya is a ball of energy and happiness when with those she is closest to. Her and Maya are total opposites in that regard, with Lidya being so introverted and Maya so extroverted, but I think that's how they work so well.

Then there's me, who's a pretty even ground when it comes to the introverted-extroverted scale, which made the three of us fit together like perfect puzzle pieces.

"Hey, sunshine," Maya says, grinning into the phone. "Guess who I'm with?"

There's a pause, then a soft, exasperated voice I can picture even without hearing it properly.

"Oh, *so now* he decides to acknowledge my existence," Lidya says loud enough for both of us to hear. "Wow. *The* Vaughn Morozov, who thinks texting me *once* a month and thinking it counts as communication."

I lean forward and rest my chin on my palms, "I literally texted you two days ago."

“You sent me a meme of a raccoon in a Gucci belt.”

“And you replied with ‘icon.’ Sounds like a solid exchange to me.”

“And what about after the meme, when I asked you to call so we could catch up about all the things you’ve gotten up to since you moved, and you never replied?” She says it with a kind, half-joking tone, but I recognise the other half too, which has a clear level of hurt within it.

I instantly feel guilty. “Sorry, Lids, I’ll try more. Get Maya on my ass in the future. I’ve just been busy lately.”

Maya’s eyes glitter. “Don’t let him gaslight you, babe. He’s been too busy playing prank wars with Yulian to talk to anyone else.”

I sit up straighter. “It’s not a prank war.”

“No?” she arches a brow. “What would *you* call it then?”

“Revenge.”

“Ooh, my mistake.” She clutches her chest dramatically. “Sorry, Lidya. You hear that? It’s not pranks. It’s revenge. Much more mature.”

Lidya giggles on the line, that soft, silvery laugh that always made me think of wind chimes and late spring. “What sort of pranks?”

“They’re not pranks!” I exclaim, but I’m easily ignored by both of them, in favour of further discussing our ‘pranks’.

“Well, you know how I told you about the annex being set on fire on the first night Vaughn was here,” Maya says dramatically.

Lidya hums in agreement. “I was so worried when you told me. Imagine it had been the actual mansion!”

Yeah, me and you both, Lids.

“*Right?* Anyway, so what I haven’t got around to telling you yet is basically we all think that it was Yulian, who was trying to get Vaughn’s attention.”

Lidya gasps intensely.

Maya nods her head in agreement, even though Lidya isn’t here to see her. “But, none of us are really talking about it because it’s, like, totally Vaughn’s business and, like, we all know not to get involved when it comes to the two of them cause of, like,”

Maya gives me a side eye, as if debating what to say next, and I simply stare back at her with a ‘*are you serious’*, look.

“Well,” continues Maya, “the stuff that happened when we were little, you know?”

“Uh-huh,” comes Lidya’s response.

“So, that was like the start of it, presumably, but also, Vaughn found a bunch of dead mice in his helmet, so he had a shipment of Yulian’s destroyed, then his first thing of representing the family, you know, with those British business guys, went terribly wrong cause’ of an ‘anonymous tip’, and now, just a few days ago, Vaughn totally destroyed Yulian’s car. Like burned it to a crisp.”

Lidya gasps again. “No way! Go off, Vaughn. You go, King!”

I grimace. “Don’t call me that. It’s Morozov. Even though it seems statistically unlikely at this point, I’m actually not one of the people in this family to end up with the last name King, one day.”

Giggling, Lidya says “oops, sorry, forgot half of us are marrying into them now.”

“Mhm,” adds Maya, sadly, “even my sister.” She looks dejected for a few moments before suddenly brightening back up again. “Oh, also, cause’ Vaughn had two pranks in a row on him-“

“They’re not pranks-“

“-with the annex fire and mice incident, I totally think Vaughn must have done something between them, I just can’t get him to admit what.”

“Oh, Vaughn, you have to tell us! Please!” pleads Lidya over the phone, while Maya gives her best puppy dog eyes.

I glare at her. “I’m *not* telling you.”

Maya’s mouth drops open. “So, you *did* do something!”

Ah, fuck.

The two of them then proceed to beg and beg me to tell them, but I vehemently refuse. Never in a million years could you get me to admit I destroyed his house in a jealous-filled rage and left a cryptid message in blood on the wall. And we call *him* dramatic.

Finally, they give up.

“Well,” starts Lidya, “I suppose it’s not that surprising. He and Yulian always did seem a little obsessed growing up. I mean, the boys were usually a little too in their own worlds to see it, but I always thought it was kind of obvious.”

Maya gasps. “You’re so right. The boys are such morons, so self-absorbed. It was always, like, every other sentence was *Yulian this, Yulian that, Yulian sent me another video, Yulian haunts my dreams-“*

“Okay, first of all,” I say, holding up a hand. “I never said that last one.”

I mean, sure, it was true, but I never said it.

“You didn’t have to.” Maya’s smile is all teeth. “It’s in your eyes.”

I look up at the sky like maybe, just maybe, God will take me out right here. A lightning bolt, an anvil, something clean and merciful.

"I hate both of you," I mutter.

"No, you don't," Lidya says sweetly. "You love us. Deep down. Where your heart lives next to all your repressed feelings and emotional constipation."

"Tell me how you really feel," I say.

There's a pause. Then Lidya's voice gets a little softer, not sad, but careful. "But seriously, V. What's actually going on with you two?"

I pause too long.

"Yeah," Maya says, quiet now, her tone dipping just slightly from playful to pointed. "I mean, you really did used to talk about him a lot. And we can all tell that something is happening right now. I mean, you came to the *Island*. We never thought you would outside the initiations. Because of him."

I stiffen. My first instinct is always to joke, to bury anything real under something cutting and sharp and sarcastic, but the way they're both watching me, even through a damn phone call, I know they won't let it slide.

The truth is, I did choose not to come to the island because of him. But then I also came to the Island because of him. Well, I came

because of my parents, but they only sent me here because they thought it was what I wanted. And I had wanted it, at one point, to be with him.

It somehow feels like so much happened in such a short amount of time, yet, also, so little happened in such a long time. I mean, it's only been a few months since Camilla, sure, but it's been *eight years* since the basement.

Lidya must sense the shift in me, even through the phone, because she speaks again. "We're not trying to push. I just want you to know... we're here, you know? For you. Whatever's happened between you, whatever *is* happening between you, even if it's... him. We're not going to judge."

Her voice is like balm, soft and gentle, never demanding, never cruel, and maybe that's *exactly* the problem.

Because it hits too close, too hard and too deep. Especially coming from her. From her, of all people. She is the last person to be treating me with such kindness, such empathy in this situation.

I stand too fast, hands already clenched before I even register it. "I don't want to hear about that," I say, and my voice is too sharp, too sudden. "Especially not from *you*, Lidya."

The silence that follows is immediate. Heavy. Crushing.

Maya doesn't say anything. For once, she just... goes quiet. Which, for her, is so incredibly rare.

On the other end of the line, Lidya is gentle. Still so *kind*. “Vaughn... I didn’t mean to upset you. I’m sorry.”

I shake my head, even though she can’t see me. The bench, the trees, the winter air, it all feels too close, like it’s pressing in from every side.

“It’s fine,” I say, because it’s the only thing I can say without screaming. “I just... I’d rather not talk about it.”

Another pause.

Then Lidya whispers, “Okay. We’ll drop it.”

I sit back down, slower this time. Staring straight ahead. Watching my breath fog the air in short, controlled bursts like it might carry the weight of everything I’m not saying.

I hate how much they know me. I hate how much they care. I feel so guilty, for treating my cousin this way. For snapping at her when she is last person I should be mad at in this situation, when, if anything, she should be mad at *me*. But she isn’t, because she is too good for that.

“Sorry,” I mutter, mad at myself. I drop my head down to my chest, unable to look at Maya, for a moment.

But, then, I feel her hand on my shoulder, and I glance up, to find her looking at me with a gentle smile, as if telling me everything is alright.

Clearly noting how desperately I want to move on from this conversation, Maya clears her throat. “So, Lidya, when are you going to come and join us over here. You’re the last one left, babe, and I need my bestie!”

Lidya groans dramatically, though I can sense the relief and gratitude in her voice, thankful to Maya for resolving the tension. “We’ve had this conversation like a million times, My. I like New York. In fact, I love New York! My parents are here and you know I miss them when we’re apart.”

She’s telling the truth. No matter how many times that Maya, and the others, who all have a soft spot for the sweet, kind girl that is Lidya Morozov, she insists that she doesn’t want to part from her parents for so long. And to be fair to her she is a NYC girl through and through, her and Maya have probably spent a small countries GDP on their shopping sprees over the years.

Maya pouts her lip, clearly ignoring the fact that Lidya can’t see her. “Girl, we miss our parents too! But we call, like, every day, and we have each other. Plus… before, Vaughn was in New York with you too, now, he’s here! Surely you can’t accept being so far from *both* members of the amazing OG trio.”

Lidya laughs, loud and bright. “Well, I suppose that is true…”

Maya’s mouth drops open in shock, as does mine. I hadn’t been expecting her to say that.

“Wait, are you actually moving here?” I ask, unable to contain my excitement. Lids really is like a sister to me, and having her here would make the stress of everything so, so much easier to handle.

“I mean, I might have been having some conversations with my parents about it…” she admits, and Maya immediately starts squealing.

The both of us instantly begin rambling about it’ll be like with her on the island, but she stops us before we can get ahead of ourselves.

“Wait! I said that I’ve had conversations, not that it’s confirmed. And, if I did choose to move, I’d do it for the beginning of the next school year, so it wouldn’t be any time soon.”

We both fail to hide our disappointment, the next school year is far away.

Lidya sighs. “You were right though, since Vaughn has been gone, it has felt a little lonelier, even with my parents around. I’d miss New York so much… but not as much as I miss you guys.”

“Aww!” squeals Maya, bursting in a speech about how much she adores our friend, as well as how much she misses her too. You’d think, by the way they are talking, that they don’t text and call every day, nor did they see each other just a few weeks ago for the holidays.

I, too, add how much I miss Lidya since I’ve got here, and how happy I’d be if she were to move here with us. I make a mental note to speak to my parents and my Aunt and Uncle so they can hopefully convince her to come here.

“But…” says Maya mischievously, “until then, at least, we need to make sure we are keeping up with each other, still.” She looks at me with a very pointed raised eyebrow. Don’t know what that could

possibly be for.

“Yes! V, we will make a group chat, so we can group text more. Even if you’re always busy, please.”

I laugh, “yes, okay, fine, I promise I will be an active member in this group chat.”

As if on queue, I feel my phone buzz to see

You have been added to ‘The OT’.

I suppose Maya wasn’t wasting any time.

“Oh my God! The OT, I had totally forgot we called ourselves that,” laughs Lidya.

Maya nods as if it is very important information. “Of course, if he can prove himself a worthy member, and one who doesn’t ditch us to fuck his former professor, no matter how hot said former professor may be, G can too be added, in time.”

Gareth truly is growing closer with the three of us, and I have no doubt it won’t be long until he worms his way into our little group.

“But then what will the group chat be called?” I ask. “We won’t be just The Original Trio anymore.”

Maya scrunches up her nose, seemingly taking the question very

seriously, and thinking deeply about it.

“Um… The Not-So-OG?” suggests Lidya.

“Funny, but too long,” dismisses Maya.

“The OT Plus G?” proposes Lidya again.

“Mm… better, but still a little too long,” states Maya.

“Then how about just The OTG?” I recommend.

The response comes from both of them at the same time.

“Yes!”

-

Yulian

-

It’s been a few days since I got my new car and the sun is bleeding through the high glass windows of the terrace room like it owns the place. I’m sitting across from Tati, who has one leg draped casually over the arm of the velvet chaise like she’s posing for a portrait, except she’s eating a slice of mango with a silver fork and listing increasingly absurd ideas for my next move against Vaughn. She’s got that gleam in her eye, the one that says she’s having fun stirring chaos even if she pretends to be above it.

We are siblings, after all.

"Okay, hear me out," she says, mouth full, "you buy a billboard outside the uni. Just his face. That's it. But draw a moustache and some devil horns on him. Maybe, if you feel like it, add a Russian insult on the bottom of it. Just for a bit of personalisation."

I snort, tipping my head back against the leather of the chair and letting my hand dangle lazily off the armrest. "He'd act like he doesn't care and then burn it down."

"That's the point, Yulian. Escalation. Chaos. We thrive in Chaos."

She says it like it's our family motto, which… given the mess our bloodline is, it may as well be. I tap my fingers against my thigh, still thinking. Still tasting the adrenaline of the last few weeks like it's sugar on the back of my tongue.

It started with the mice. That one was just a bit of fun really. There was small infestation of mice in the mansion, and we were able to catch and kill them all, but I figured, why not put them to good use? Then he destroyed my shipment, and that really pissed me off. So I ruined his time with the British businessmen, just to remind him that his freedom doesn't mean invincibility.

Then it was the car. Well, my car. Burned down in the car park of the University like some sacrificial offering to the gods of his grudge. I should've been furious. I *was* furious. And yet here I am, plotting retaliation with my sister like it's a party game.

"I want to do something that throws him off. Something…

inconvenient. Personal."

Tati raises an eyebrow. "Like?"

I grimance. "I don't know, I have no ideas, that's why I'm here with you."

"I already gave you an idea!" she says, but she's smiling.

"The billboard does not count."

For a while, we just sit in silence. The kind that stretches long and comfortable between people who've grown up surrounded by knives and expectations and somehow still managed to love each other through it. But then she shifts, one shoulder lifting, and I know the air is about to change.

"So," she says slowly, stabbing another piece of fruit. "Is there a reason you two are partaking in this prank war, aside from the obvious?"

"They're not pranks," I mutter, offended at the suggestion.

"Well, that's what everyone is calling it!" she retorts, her mouth full of food.

"It's our war. Always has been."

Tati squints at me, curious and quiet for a beat. Then: “Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?”

“I mean why do you care so much?” she asks. “It’s not like you ever wanted to talk about him with me growing up. You shut me down every chance you could. You’re obsessed with him, Yul. I’m not judging, but if you hate him this much, why the fixation? Why not just… let it go?”

I clench my jaw. Something tightens in my chest, that familiar grind of fury and guilt and something darker I don’t name. “Because this is just what we do. This is how we’ve always been. He fights; I fight back harder. He’s the match, and I set it alight. And besides, you speak as if the obsession is one-sided. It’s not.”

“Sure,” she replies, sceptical.

“He’s the one who started it,” I say. “He’s the one who looked at me like I was already the enemy before I even opened my mouth.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose, frustration bleeding into every corner of my chest. “I don’t get him,” I mutter. “It’s like every time we take a step forward; he pulls us ten steps back. Like he’s waiting for a reason to hate me again.”

Tati doesn’t say anything at first.

“I get why you’re frustrated,” she says quietly. “But... I think Vaughn has a reason to be angry. Has a reason to hate you, even.” Her voice goes so soft at the end, I barely hear it, like she knows how much she

is upsetting me with her words.

I snap my head toward her. “Are you serious?”

“I’m not saying I agree with how he handles it. I’m just saying... I get his side.”

My jaw tightens. “So, you’re on his side now?”

“No,” she says, firm. “I’m on your side. I’m always on your side. You’re my brother, Yulian. No matter what. But I think you’re also... a little in the wrong.”

I stare at her, stunned. “For what? For trying to help him? For doing everything I could to get him out of that hellhole? How is that worth eight years of hatred?”

Tati hesitates, as a confused expression takes over her face, then speaks carefully. “What do you mean, ‘get him out’, Yulian... you betrayed him.”

My stomach twists. Because this is not the first time I’ve been accused of betraying Vaughn, but never by my own sister. What does she even think she knows? I’ve practically never spoken to her about him, she is the one thing I’ll always protect from what could be even the slightest bit of danger. And while his hatred was something I could handle directed at me, it wasn’t something I would ever tolerate directed at her.

I laugh, once, sharp and bitter. “What are you talking about?”

She frowns. “I’m not mad at you. I know why you did it. But from his perspective… you were wearing a wire, Yulian. You were feeding Dad information about him. About the escape. That’s not nothing. I mean, that was weeks, months even, of pretending to be his friend. I think maybe you should be more understanding of why he can’t trust you.”

I go still.

“What?” I say, flatly.

She looks uncomfortable now. “I mean, I don’t blame you. You were a kid, and Dad was terrifying. I know you probably just wanted to impress him-”

“Wait,” I cut in. “What do you mean I was wearing a wire?”

Now she’s confused. “The microphone. The one you used to record your conversations with Vaughn.”

I shake my head slowly, like it’ll help the words make sense. “Tati… I didn’t wear anything.”

She blinks. “Yulian, what the fuck are you talking about? It’s okay if you regret it now, you were like twelve, but denying it-“

“No,” I command. “Just-just start from the beginning. What do you think happened in that basement? What do you mean by a wire?”

My hands are shaking at my sides, and I'm pretty sure my voice is too. But, honestly, I'm barely registering it, as it is almost as if my head is now in a fog. The only thing I see clearly is my sister, telling me exactly how Vaughn views our time in the basement. Exactly what he thinks happened the night we tried to escape.

Tati starts slow, as if talking to a scared animal. "It was in the days after the escape attempt. You were still away after dad sent you on the training exercise as a reward. I wanted to know what exactly was going on, so I crept downstairs and listened in on his study."

My breathing quickens. There was no training exercise. The reason my sister didn't see me for a while was because I was recovering from almost being beaten to death. I was told explicitly to stay away from her to prevent her getting involved, but now I see there was a bigger reason.

"He was meeting with a few of the other top members of the organization. They were listening to the recordings from the microphone you had been wearing in the basement. He was bragging about how great you were, doing his dirty work, as if they should be jealous of how great of an heir you are."

Her breathing speeds up to match my own, while her voice gets lower, and more unsure, as if she is realizing by the look on my face, that was she is saying is not the truth.

"The recording was so clear. It had to be right by you guys. Or, attached to you, without Vaughn's knowledge. He talked about how he had already shown Vaughn the recordings, so he could make it clear exactly what trap he had fallen into. The other men laughed at it. Then he started talking about a piece of paper."

If my veins weren't already frozen, they certainly are now.

“Father said you were able to get Vaughn to write down the addresses of importance on a piece of paper. And you gave it to him. He had them with him in there, showing the other men. They were talking about using it to attack Vaughn’s family. His branch of the mafia. He said it would have to be soon and when it was done, they would send Vaughn home, finally, to see the mess he had created. The people he loved, hurt by his inability to pick who to trust. What his trust in you had resulted in.”

I can’t even describe the emotions toiling inside of me right now. Confusion, anger, guilt, understanding, loathing, hatred, sadness, blame. It’s all boiling over and *Ican’tbreathe.*

“He said he also shown Vaughn the piece of paper, shown him exactly how easy it was going to be to attack his home, his family, all thanks to you. Or better yet, all thanks to him, for falling for your tricks in the first place.”

She is finished now. But I don’t say anything. I just stare. We sit in silence, for a moment, as I choke on the air around me and my mind simultaneously moves too fast for me to keep up and freezes into deadly stillness all at once.

Then, finally, I hear a small, emotional voice come from across me. “That’s not what happened, exactly, is it?”

Somehow, and I don’t think I’ll ever fully understand how, I pull all the emotional strength I have left inside my decaying mind and manage to nod.

“But, that’s what he thinks happened, isn’t it?”

I nod again.

And my whole world collapses.

Chapter End Notes

so, i hope you liked that. i would like to say, the final scene of yulian (mostly) discovering the truth with tati is only halfway through, the second half will be the beginning of the next chap, so please dont ask loads of questions about it because they might get answered next chap!
obviously, i know the main thing from this chap was the big reveal, but i actually had the most fun writing the convo between maya, lidya and vaughn. it was only supposed to be a couple hundered words but i ended up loving writing their dynamic so much that it just kinda flowed.
i havent got work unitl friday, so im gunna try really hard to write the next chap maybe even for tomorrow, but if not then for thursday.
so, if this chap was a big one, the next will be massive. it will obvs have the second half of the convo betwen yulian and tati and then he and vaughn will have a long overdue chat...

Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Notes

> hi, you guys are welcome for taking less than 24 hours on this.
> ive literally been writing this chap for the last like 8-9 hours straight LMAO.
> i hope its everything you guys are hoping for, but i do have some stuff to say about it at the end
> enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

My mind is underwater.

There's a hollow ringing in my ears, not unlike the silence that follows an explosion. A strange, suffocating weight settles on my chest, but I can't find the air to lift it. I don't know how long I've been standing here, but my legs are shaking like they're carrying the weight of my entire fucking life.

Then I hear it.

A voice.

No, not a voice, a name. My name.

Faint at first, like it's echoing from underwater. Then louder. And louder. Until it tears through the haze like lightning cracking through storm clouds.

“Yulian.”

I blink. Hard. The fog doesn’t clear so much as crack and splinter at the edges. My vision refocuses, and suddenly-

Tati is in front of me.

Tati, her hands gripping my arms, her eyes wide and wet and desperate. Her mouth is still forming my name, over and over again, and I realize I’ve been gone. Lost in my head.

“Tati?” I croak.

“Oh, thank God,” she breathes, and I don’t think I’ve ever seen her like this. Her face is equal to that of utter devastation, and not for herself. But for me. Her expression is cracked open in a way that’s raw and ruined.

She gently tugs me downward. I don’t resist. I hadn’t even fully realized I was standing until my knees fold, and I collapse onto the sofa. My body’s moving out of instinct more than anything else.

She sits beside me, still touching my arm like I might disappear again.

“Yulian,” she whispers, voice trembling, “can you tell me what actually happened?”

I shake my head. I don't want to speak. Speaking makes it more real. But something in her gaze breaks past the iron wall I've thrown up since the moment everything I've believed for the last eight years turned out to be a lie.

So, I tell her. Or, at least, I try.

"The-the, the microphone?" I finally manage to say. And even though I'm supposed to be explaining, it comes out as more of a question. "There were recordings?" I mumble, and I've barely even started, yet I've already given up. My mind is too busy trying to make sense of things to comprehend explaining what is and isn't real. At this point, I'm not even sure I know myself.

Tati gently rubs her hand up and down my arm. "Yes, Yulian, the microphone? You were wearing it-"

"I wasn't wearing a microphone!" I suddenly stand and scream, jerking away from her so hard she flinches back. My breathing quickens again and my mind races.

I wasn't, was I? No, I didn't, I wouldn't. But I did? They said I did. No, I would know. But it still happened. But what did happen? I don't know. I don't understand.

My mind is a confused, scrambled mess of memories that I can't decipher. It's as if I'm no longer able to separate dream from reality, fake from real.

Eyes squeezing together rapidly, as if it will force my brain into action, I think, no, I'm *sure* that I wasn't wearing a microphone. I know I wasn't. I wore something different almost every night, so it can't have been on my clothes. What could it have been on then?

Where was the microphone?

Tati says it was clearly extremely close, but it was a mostly empty room aside from the boxes, but if there were a wire in there, it would have been muffled.

I don't understand again. *Fuck*.

"Yules?" Tati speaks to me so quietly, so hesitantly. I lock my eyes with hers and I see fear in them. Not of me, but for me. She's never seen me like this, never. I've always been her strong, crazy older brother. Not someone who has a mental breakdown over a boy who, until a few moments ago, she thought he had betrayed.

My sister pulls me to the sofa again and moves me until I lie down, my head in her lap. I usually wouldn't let her see me so vulnerable, but right now, I just feel so shattered. She runs her hand through my hair and leans close to me to speak softly, but loud enough so I can still hear.

"How about this, I'll ask you a question. Something simple, and you can choose if you want to answer, and how much detail you want to go into, hm?"

She gives me a teary, wobbly smile as she gazes down at me. I can't help but stare into her eyes, and think of our mother, who she resembles so strongly in this moment it takes my breath away. I know she would be so proud of my upbeat, confident little sister if she were here. And I can't help but be grateful that Tati is all our mother and none of our father.

I nod, subtly, but she catches it and murmurs an 'okay' to me.

She allows for a few seconds of calming quiet. I think about my father's office, of him sat in there, surrounded by his equally cruel allies, laughing at the conversation Vaughn and I had down there. Of how I now finally have an answer on how he knew about the escape attempt.

Tati's voice cuts through. "Did you really give father a piece of paper with Vaughn's family's important addresses, given to you by Vaughn."

I shake my head. I open my mouth to explain, but it comes out croaked at first. "Vaughn wanted me to go with him, but I refused. He gave me those addresses so I could go and find him after he escaped, if I changed my mind. I kept them in my pocket. When I finally woke up properly, a couple days after the beating, I found the paper in my pocket, where I had left it. I figured dad didn't find it. As soon as I saw I still had it, I burned it."

My breath comes out shaky and I avoid eye contact with my sister.

"But, I suppose, he did find it. While I was unconscious, he obviously would have heard us talking about it on the recordings, too, so he was probably looking for it. Then, when he filed them away himself, he put the paper back, so I never knew he had it."

I expect Tati to question me on the topic further, but when I glance up at her after a moment too long of quiet, I see silent tears streaming down her face. When she notices me looking, she opens her mouth.

"Beating?" is all she says, and I realise I've made a mistake. I had been instructed not to tell her about the beating by my father, but I wouldn't have told her even if I hadn't been told that. I know she would carry guilt, and that's not something I ever want her to feel.

When I fail to respond, she says “there was no training exercise, was there?”

I shake my head.

“Yulian, please…” while she doesn’t expand on what she is asking, I know. I don’t want to, I never have, but I know I owe her this. She already knows too much.

“On the night I tried to help Vaughn escape, actually escape, not with father knowing, when he caught us, I just froze at first. It was like my mind was struggling to process what was going on, and so I did nothing as his guards dragged Vaughn away. Then he took me to his office and beat me almost to death.”

A loud gasp echoes from above, then a sob.

“I think even he was shocked by how violent he got. I may have betrayed him that day, not Vaughn, but I was still his son and heir. I don’t think he intended to go that far. But I was unconscious for a few days, then in and out for another few. I was kept in my bedroom, the doctor coming frequently to check on me. Father forbid me from telling anyone, even you.”

I don’t tell her how I wouldn’t have told her anyway. I have no doubt it would only make things worse.

Sitting up until I’m alongside my sister, I drag her into my arms, and she buries her face against my chest, just how she did when we were nothing but scared children hiding from our cruel father, and no mother to protect us.

Letting out a sigh, I rub her back. “Tati… it was a long time ago. It’s over now. I’m okay.”

It is most definitely not over, not even close, nor is anything okay.

Rather than acknowledging me, however, Tati says “he must believe you actually did all those things.” It’s muffled by her face in my chest, but I hear it.

The microphone, the recordings, the paper, the fake friendship, the betrayal. He must believe it all. And I can’t even blame him, because the proof, no matter how doctored, how twisted, was right there.

“You fucking liar!”

Vaughns voice, still a child, trapped in that basement, echoes through my mind.

“You used me! You- you tricked me!”

I had thought they were words of a traumatised young boy, who was so close to freedom yet failed at the last moment, who needed someone to blame. And as the person who failed in the first place, I understood why it was me.

But now I see his accusations for what they truly were. Accusations of betrayal and misplaced trust. All these years of screams about trickery and manipulation, they all make sense. It’s like something clicks into my brain, now, as I take a much-needed deep breath. There are still

gaps, sure, but right now, I know there is only one person who can fill them in.

Who *deserves* to fill them in. To tell his side of the story. To tell his point of view.

The horror of it all settles into my gut like stone.

I stand abruptly, causing Tati to furrow her brows in confusion. “What are you…” she starts.

“I have to go to Vaughn,” I state, already moving toward the door. Nothing else is on my mind, no reason, no logic. Just him. Always him.

My sister jumps up and moves to stand in front of me. “Woah! Hey!” she shouts. “You can’t. Not like this. You’re not in the right headspace.”

I shake my head violently. “It doesn’t matter. Nothing matters more than this. He’s spent years thinking I was a traitor. He-he fucking *told* me I was a traitor! Again, and again and again and I just- just, I don’t know!”

Tati grips my wrist. “Yulian, be reasonable, please. He still might not even believe you. You don’t have any proof. Only your word.”

“He has to hear it anyway. I have to *try*.”

“It’s been eight years, Yulian! And he never asked,” she snaps, and I flinch. “He never asked, never tried to talk to you in the first place. If Vaughn had just *communicated* instead of shutting down, this could’ve been fixed *years ago*. But he didn’t. And you think, now, on this random day, you’ll just show up, explain and everything will be fixed?”

That-

That hits something in me.

Something hot and sharp and mean.

“You’re one to talk about communication,” I snarl. “You *knew*. You *knew* and you never told me. Not once. You just let me live in ignorance.”

Her mouth drops open.

“I tried,” she fires back. “But you never wanted to talk about it. You shut down *every* time I brought him up. Every time. How the fuck was I supposed to know that every damn person in this fucking mess somehow had a different view of how it all went down?”

I step toward her, my pulse roaring in my ears.

“I didn’t know what to say! Hell, I didn’t want you to know anything in the first place. I thought he hated me for failing him. I thought it was *my fault.* And it *wasn’t.*”

“Are you-,” she yells, stepping toward me too. She takes a deep breath, like she is trying to calm herself down. “I knew how badly you betrayed him. And I still- still stayed loyal to you. I thought you had been nothing but cruel toward him, and I didn’t care. Because you’re my big brother and I love you.”

I breathe hard through my nose. My chest heaves. She’s right.

“I have done nothing but what you ask- avoid talking about Vaughn- and tell you the truth when you needed it. I have done my best to be there for you however I thought was needed. And I *don’t* appreciate you taking out your clear anger and hurt on me right now. It is not fair to me.”

She’s completely fucking right.

I deflate.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “I didn’t mean- Tati, I didn’t mean to blame you. I’m sorry.”

She softens. Her eyes shine. I step forward and wrap my arms around her.

She hugs me back fiercely, clutching at the back of my shirt like she’s scared I’ll vanish. But even with her arms around me, I know where I need to go.

I pull back.

“I have to go to him.”

Confliction decorates her expression. Her teeth grit like she is forcing herself not to say what she really wants to, probably because she knows it won’t change anything. Finally, she nods slowly. Her jaw is tight. “I don’t like it. But I understand. Be careful.”

I squeeze her hand once.

Then I turn and walk away, each step taking me closer to the truth we should have known years ago.

-

I wait outside the campus building like a lunatic. Hands sweating on my lap, body trembling. I’m parked behind some shrubbery, near to where Vaughn has parked his bike, waiting for him. It’s on a quieter side of campus, where not many students are around, not this late in the day. In the winter season, the sun is already setting.

I’m barely breathing.

I have his timetable memorised now. I did it as soon as Mikhail got it for me. I stared at the timetable until it was engraved in my mind, and at the time, if you would have asked, I would have said it was for revenge, part of our war. But now? I’ll admit that it’s just because I’m that fucking obsessed with him.

He’s late. Never runs to get anywhere, just strolls, slow and

infuriating. But eventually, he appears, dark hoodie, headphones in, expression unreadable except to me. He looks like he hasn't slept. His jaw is locked tight, and his shoulders set like stone.

I don't know what I'm going to say yet. I just know I need to say something.

He crosses the courtyard with that same irritating confidence, weaving between the few people around like the world isn't real and nothing can touch him. Like I haven't spent the last hour that I've been waiting for him spiralling. Because suddenly, things don't make sense the way they used to, and yet, at the same time, everything finally makes more sense than ever before.

He's almost to his bike when I swing the door open and call his name.

"Vaughn!"

His head turns toward me and even from the slight distance, I see his eyes widen in chock at the sight of me. He wouldn't have expected me to get to close to him like this, not in public. He slows but doesn't stop. Just continues to his bike and hurriedly tries to put his helmet on.

"Vaughn, I swear to God, stop fucking walking."

He doesn't. Just keeps heading to his bike like I'm not there, like I'm not chasing him through the wreckage of my own mind.

I jog after him, swallowing frustration like it's water. "We need to talk."

“No, we don’t,” he mutters angrily, yanking his helmet over his head. He won’t meet my eyes.

“Yes, we fucking do-”

He’s already straddling the bike.

“Vaughn, stop!”

But the engine growls, and then he’s peeling away, dirt spitting up behind his tyres, leaving me with nothing but exhaust and rage.

I don’t even hesitate.

I swing myself back into the car, throw it into gear, and slam my foot to the floor. The tyres screech as I tear out of the car park after him.

I don’t know where he’s going, but I don’t care. He’s not running from me today.

The island blurs around us. Trees. Pavement. Open road. I watch him from behind, his back curled over the bike, body tense. He knows I’m here. Every now and then, he throws a glance behind to see if I’m still here. And even though I can’t see his face, I recognise the rage building in him each time.

He speeds up, so I do too.

He takes a sharp right onto a narrow side road, heading toward the forest that borders the far end of the island, the cliffs, the sea, and the place where no one goes without a reason.

I should be worried. But all I feel is the thundering burn of blood in my ears. He's trying to lead me somewhere.

Good. Let him.

We twist through dirt roads, the canopy darkening above us, green and golden light slicing across my windshield. The world gets quieter, more distant, more unreal.

And then he stops.

At the edge of the woods, the trees open into a clearing, and beyond that- blue. Endless blue. The cliff.

I slam the brakes and skid into the clearing just as he throws his leg off the bike and rips his helmet from his head. His hair is a mess. His eyes wild. He throws the helmet hard; it hits a tree trunk and thuds to the ground like a warning.

"What the fuck do you want, Yulian?" he screams, voice cracked with fury, with exhaustion, with something I can't name. "Why the hell are you following me?"

I kill the engine. Step out slow. The air between us is electric. Dangerous.

“You wouldn’t talk to me,” I say, too calm, too cold, because I’m burning from the inside out.

“That’s because I don’t want to,” he spits, taking a step toward me. “I don’t want to hear another excuse, or another lie or whatever game you’ve got planned next.”

“I’m not playing-”

“You’re always playing!”

He’s shaking. Hands clenched at his sides. Breathing like he’s been running for miles.

I feel like I’ve been running for years. Chasing him for years.

-

Vaughn

-

Something feels different.

Yulian stands across from me like a goddamn ghost. Like someone pretending to wear his skin.

When he approached me on campus, I was frustrated. Who he is to disturb me when I’m busy? I felt the fury rise inside of me as it always does when it comes to him, all the rage that I’ve spent years trying to

smother, crawling up my throat like it's trying to choke me.

But, for once, I ran. Rather than picking a fight, an argument, in front of all those people, I tried to walk away, despite the anger boiling under my skin. But of course, he had to follow me.

I don't understand what's happening right now, we had rules, unspoken ones, sure, but rules all the same. So far, we've simply gone back and forth, one sabotages the other, then the other takes revenge and so on. Sure, we've had our odd passive-aggressive comments in the moments where we have crossed paths, but this?

Chasing one another throughout the island like this, I hadn't been expecting this at all. What the fuck could he possibly want to do all this? It feels so… off.

Like something has changed.

At first, my view was clouded by my frustration, my vision tunneled on getting away. But now, as I stand before Yulian, staring at him dead on, I can tell that he isn't the same person he was the last time I saw him. He carries himself differently.

He had always looked at me with a level of frustration, but also excitement and eagerness, like I was a toy he couldn't wait to get his hands on.

But now? He just seems… sad.

I hadn't even thought he were capable of the emotion, really. But here I am, stood before Yulian, watching him stare at me as if it's the first

time he has ever really looked at me. His spine isn't sharp with tension. His eyes aren't gleaming with glee or boiling with anger. He's just still.

What on earth could have happened to tear Yulian Dimitriev down so much?

"Please," he says. His voice cuts through the silence like it's already been screaming. "Just let me speak. For one fucking minute, Vaughn."

Is he stupid? I roll my eyes. "Why the fuck should I listen to anything you have to say. It's only ever lies that come out-"

I'm cut off, as with what feels like inhuman speed, Yulian storms toward me, grabbing me by the neck and holding me against the nearest tree. I gasp in shock when I look into his eyes. They changed so fast. Just a moment ago, they seemed dead to the world, now they blaze with a raging inferno, and he barely looks like he has control.

"You will listen to me," he grits, "because you are mine, Vaughn Morozov, you are mine and you have been for the last eight fucking years."

My heart beats violently in my chest.

"I might have let you have your fun all this time, *Mishka*," my skin tingles and burns all at once, "but that was when I thought I was owed your hatred. But not anymore. Now, you'll know the truth, as much as I do. And when you do, you'll finally get it through that pretty little head of yours that You. Belong. To. Me."

What. The. Fuck?

He breathes deeply, his face so close to mine I can feel the warmth of his breath against my cold cheek.

I blink. “Well then… *speak*,” I demand.

His eyes, still so close to mine, dart around my face, before they settle on my slightly parted lips. For a moment, I almost think he is going to lean in. But then his eyes lift back up to mine.

“What happened in the basement?”

The moment the words leave his mouth, *something inside me snaps*.

He barely even finishes the final word before my fist is slamming into his face and the sound of it cracks through the trees. He’s clearly taken by surprise, and to be honest, I think I am too. His head jerks to the side and he stumbles, but he doesn’t fall.

I wait for a moment, for him to come back at me.

But he doesn’t hit me back.

Why the *fuck* isn’t he hitting me back?

Well, fine, if he isn’t interested, I certainly am.

I don't even realize I've hit him again until my knuckles sting, until the bones in my hand grind like they might split apart. And still, I don't stop. He blocks several of my blows but makes no attempt to end the beating.

"You want me to say what happened?" I scream; every word laced with years of venom. "You want me to help you relive it like the sick fuck you are?"

All I see is *him*. The boy who used to grin at me like we shared a secret no one else would ever understand. The boy who stayed up all night talking to me when I felt like the world was ending. The boy who said he would protect me and then left me to rot. And now he's sat here, claiming that I'm fucking *his*?

I *hate* him for that.

And I was such a fool. I *let* him in. I let him get close. I trusted him, with everything, with parts of me no one else ever got. He knew every scar, every fear, every weak spot. And he used them all against me.

I trusted him with my *family*.

I can't breathe. My fists keep swinging, but I'm not even in control anymore. I'm spiralling under the weight of it, the betrayal, the shame, the grief. I want to rip him apart and I want him to look at me like he did down there, and I want to forget he ever existed. I want to go back and *undo* the part of me that still aches for him.

I despise myself for it. For still being tangled in the memory of him, still waking up with his name half-formed on my tongue. After everything he's done, to me, to my family, how the fuck do I still *care*? I can't forgive myself, not ever.

And now he wants me to retell it? He wants me to relive all that pain?

Well, fine then. I don't understand why, but it's like I *need* him to know. I need him to know how much pain he caused me. How much he has hurt me. I know he won't care, I know that if anything, he'll find glee in hearing first hand how well his tricks worked.

But I just feel so tired.

My punches finally turn sloppy, not because I'm running out of energy to throw them, but because I just can't anymore. They finally end when Yulian catches both my wrists in his hands, and I don't try to remove them.

I'm straddling his waist, sat on the ground on the edge of this cliff and as I look over it, I see the sun settling. It's almost ironic, how much beauty I see in this moment consider the anguish swirling inside me.

Yulian tugs me down toward him, looking me dead in the eye. "Tell me. What happened."

And I do.

"I sat in that basement for hours," I start. "Until your father came to see me. I asked about you, he said you'd done a good job."

I feel Yulian freeze beneath me.

“And then he brought out that piece of paper. The one I gave you, oh so willingly,” I let out a sharp laugh. “But even then, I didn’t believe it, there was no way. Not after everything. Oh, how wrong I was. So, then he played me the recordings from the microphone you wore. And that was pretty hard to deny. And I knew.”

It feels as if Yulian’s hands holding my arms are the only things keeping me upright.

My tone changes. “And then he started beating me. Harder than ever before. I thought he was going to kill me. I was sure of it. But I didn’t even care. All I could think about, was the fact that even after all he had just told me, I still wanted you.”

I feel Yulian’s grip on me tighten.

“Even after all you had done, all I wanted, the only source of comfort I could think of, was *you*.”

I go quiet for a moment. The trees rustle around us, and I can no longer see the sun ahead of me.

“Vaughn…” Yulian whispers.

“I’m not done.”

My voice is laced with such venom, such hatred that his mouth instantly shuts.

“A week goes by… and suddenly, they take me from the basement and put me in the back of a van. They say… I’m going home.”

I see Yulian’s brows furrow, and if I had to guess, I’d say there’s confusion on his face. But that can’t be right.

“And so, we drive and drive and drive. For what feels like forever. Though, I suppose the trip from Chicago to New York is a pretty long way. Until, finally, we stop, and they open the doors, and I recognise where I am. A single block away from my home. Right in New York. I was so shocked at first that they had to drag me out and dump me on the sidewalk themselves.”

I’m not sure if Yulian is breathing beneath me.

“I just stand there, for a minute. It’s been so long. But then I start walking. I walk, almost on muscle memory, I think, back to my house. Where I had lived my entire life, where I had grown up. It was where my family lives.”

I hesitate for a moment. “And then I turn the corner onto my street, and I get a perfect view of my home. In pieces. In ruins. Burned to a crisp, no life in sight.”

I swallow thickly. “It looks, almost as if, a bomb had gone off. I sat there for hours, just waiting. I didn’t know what to do with myself. All I could think was I needed to go to my parents. But I was at our house? And yet there was no house let. And no parents.”

It’s like I’m speaking on autopilot, like I’ve just mentally taken a backseat and allow my brain to do all the work. “Eventually, a member of our organization came along, presumably to take another look at the wreck. You should have seen his face when he saw me. It

was like he couldn't believe his eyes. I asked for my parents, and he complied. He took me straight to the hospital."

"My father was fine. He wasn't home at the time. Ironic, right? Considering out of all the people in that house, he would have been the main target. But my mother had a few stitches, from where she had hit her head in the blast. But they were the best off. Four of our staff had been killed immediately and another five were still recovering in the hospital."

"But that wasn't the only bomb that had gone off. At our base of operations, too. Several key, high rankings members had been killed. Men I considered uncles. But the worst? My uncle on my father's side, my actual uncle, and the father of my cousin, who I told you so much about, Lidya, had decided to bring her there that day, to show her where papa goes to work."

"Both of them were severely injured. My uncle had tried to protect her with his body, of course, but they were close to the blast. They both survived, though even the doctors couldn't say how. I'll never forget the sight of one of my best friends, my *sister*, sat in that huge hospital bed, unconscious, and being told she might not wake up."

"Even now, years later, after she has physically recovered in full, she still clings to her parents, she can't stand loud noises. Every time she flinches at so much as a plate crashing, I'm reminded of what I did."

I finally make eye contact with Yulian again and lean down close to his face. I'm shocked he's even stayed quiet this long.

"Because do you know how the attacks were able to happen? How an enemy was able to get our secret addresses? I gave them to *you*."

We breath into each other's mouths for a few seconds. Complete silence dances around us, yet neither of us breaks eye contact. The look on Yulian's face is indecipherable. For a moment, I think I recognise the emotion, but I quickly shut down the idea. He isn't capable of it.

"I didn't give him that paper."

The words come out so quietly, so softly, that I almost miss them. I likely would have, if I weren't so close to him.

Before I even realise what, I'm doing, I yank my wrists from his hands and wrap my own around his throat. "What did you just say," I grit.

Of all, *of all,* the things I thought he might say, denial was not one of them. It catches me with such surprise, such shock, I still can't fully wrap my head around it.

His hands come up to wrap around my own, attempting to pull them away. But I have the advantage.

"Vaughn…" he groans, "I let you say your piece. Now let me."

Is this dude okay? As if I'm going to let him-

He uses his strength to flip us over so I'm on the bottom. As he turns us, my arms flail, and he takes the opportunity to grab both my wrists and hold them over my head.

“I said…” he whispers into my ear, “let me.”

I don’t move or speak.

“On that night, after he took you back to the basement. He took me back to his office and nearly beat me to death.”

I freeze, wholly and completely. My brain almost seems to short-circuit.

“While I was unconscious, he must have taken the paper and the addresses, noted them for himself, then put it back in my pocket before I woke up. When I did, I assumed he had never found it, and then I burned it.”

I start to feel myself shake, almost twitching. But it’s like my body and mind are no longer one. It’s like when his father was beating me in that basement for the final time, all over again.

“I remember hearing about the attack. My father said it was the Albanians. I have no clue where that microphone was, but I promise you, it was not on me. I don’t know where it was, but I didn’t know it existed. All these years, I’ve thought your hatred for me was simply because I failed to get you out of the basement that night and the ‘betrayal’ you speak of, was simply your way of viewing it.”

I think my eyes almost gloss over, as I look up, but don’t make eye contact. It’s like I’m looking into nothingness.

“I promise you, I swear to you. On my sister’s life, I did not betray you. I did not trick you. I was never on my father’s side. I truly

intended to get you out that night and I'm sorry that I failed, but I'm not sorry for everything else. Because I. Didn't. Do. It."

I see him watching my expression, trying to gauge if I believe him or not. At first, I continue to just stare, then:

"Fucking liar."

With my arms still pinned, I use all my strength to headbutt him. He yelps, letting me go. We both stand quickly, getting into defensive positions.

My blood has gone cold, however. For a second, I actually stopped breathing. Because part of me, the part that still aches like a half-healed fracture, wants to believe him. Wants so fucking desperately for it to be true. For everything I've held inside me all these years, the bitterness, the grief, the guilt, to be some giant mistake.

But that's exactly why I can't believe it.

Because if he's telling the truth, then *what the fuck was all this for?*

"No," I growl, voice shredded and raw. "Don't you *dare* lie to me again."

He opens his mouth like he's going to speak again, but I cut him off before he can twist the knife further.

"You think swearing on your sister's life means anything to me? You

think it makes you honest?" I'm shaking, fists clenched so hard I feel my nails splitting skin. "You *lied*. You let me believe you were different to your father. You let me trust you, and you betrayed me. *Now fucking own it!*"

"I didn't," he says again, angrier this time, but I can't hear it. I *won't*.

"No!" I snap, stepping closer, rage flooding every inch of me. "Don't stand there and feed me this bullshit like I'm some idiot you can manipulate all over again."

Because if I believe him now, if I let myself think that maybe, maybe, all those nights I woke up screaming due to nightmares of being covered in my families blood, despising Yulian for what he did, and despising myself for wanting him anyway, were built on a lie someone else told, then what does that make me?

I can't undo what I've become because of him.

I *need* him to be the villain. I *need* to hate him.

Because the alternative, that I spent years hating the only person who ever truly knew me, would break me worse than anything he's already done.

"I watched my family fall apart," I snarl. "I watched people that I had known since the day I was born *die* from that bomb. I watched my sister suffer because of *you*. So don't come here and tell me it was all a misunderstanding. Don't you fucking *dare*."

And still, he just stands there. Staring at me like I'm the one bleeding.

Like I'm the one being torn open.

Fuck him for looking at me like that.

Fuck me for still wanting to believe it.

Yulian stares at me for a couple moment, then he just… sighs.

Not the theatrical kind he usually gives when he's mocking someone, not the one laced with venom or amusement. This one is… frustrated. Tired.

"Fine," he mutters, voice dropping like a blade. "You don't believe my words? Then maybe you'll believe something else."

He reaches for the hem of his shirt.

I narrow my eyes. "What the hell are you-"

He yanks it off in one motion, tossing it aside without care. My first instinct is confusion. All I see is the familiar ink curling over his pale skin, the serpent, long and dark and coiled around his torso like it's squeezing the breath from his lungs. The head of it rests high on his shoulder, mouth open in permanent hunger. The tail disappears somewhere below his waistband. And across his chest, a little more faded than when I last saw it, but unmistakable, is the 'V' scar I carved into him months ago with a heart full of fury.

"What is this supposed to mean?" I snap, my voice a bark of irritation.

“You think some ink and an old scar mean anything to me now?”

“Look closer,” he says quietly.

There’s no bite to it. No smugness. He doesn’t sound like Yulian at all, not the Yulian I remember. Not the man who is always so confident in himself, always thinks he is right.

He just sounds… hollow.

“Look,” he says again, eyes locked on mine. “Really look. Look *through* it. The tattoo.”

My jaw tightens, but something in his voice keeps me still. Keeps me from walking away. So, I step forward, reluctantly. My eyes scan over the ink again, expecting some trick, some manipulation. Some joke I’m not in on.

And then I see it.

Hidden beneath the twisting lines of the serpent, between the curves of its scales and the flourishes of shadow and light, there’s something else.

Scars.

Hundreds of them.

My breath catches. They're hard to spot at first, the tattoo is expertly designed, probably on purpose, winding perfectly to mask the worst of them. But as I focus, I start to see them. Faint ridges. Lines. Patches of skin that glint slightly differently under the light. Some are thin and precise, like the flick of a blade. Others are jagged, torn, chaotic.

"Yulian…" I breathe, but my voice gets lost somewhere between my chest and throat.

He doesn't stop. He lifts his arm, points to a long, pale scar running just beneath the ink over his ribcage.

"That one?" he says, calm. Detached. "He broke a bottle. Pressed the glass into me because I talked back in front of his men."

He turns slightly, exposing his side, where the serpent's body loops in an elegant twist around his waist.

"This one-" he points just below his collarbone "-was from the night you tried to escape. He started with his fists. He liked to wear rings, specifically to make punches more painful. He cut almost down to the bone."

I stare. I *stare*. My legs won't move. My hands won't unclench.

"Stop," I whisper. My voice doesn't even sound like mine.

He doesn't.

“That one,” he continues, tapping the curve of his abdomen, “was on the night you tried to escape. He moved onto a belt buckle next. The metal kind, with the sharp edges.”

“Stop.” Louder this time. My heartbeat is a violent, staggering thing in my chest.

Yulian shrugs, and points to his back. I can’t see it all, but I catch glimpses of more scars there, peeking between shadows and ink. He glances over his shoulder.

“There’s one down my spine from when he finally spiralled into his rage and threw his office chair at me on the night you tried to escape. He threw it so hard, some of the screws came loose and embedded themselves in me.”

“*Stop.*” My voice cracks. I don’t even know where I’m looking anymore. The scars blur. My vision blurs.

He turns back to face me, calm as ever. Unapologetic. But not cruel.

“This one-” he lifts his hand and presses it flat against his stomach; over a patch of twisted skin the serpent almost fully conceals “-was the worst. On the night you tried to escape-”

Please, *please* stop saying that.

“-after he was finished with his beating, he opened his safe, which he keeps in his office. Then he took out pure sulfuric acid, which he keeps especially to torture those who refuse to break. And then he poured it right on me. It was the worst pain I ever felt, the only relief

was that it was the final push I needed to pass out. I needed a skin graft because the burns went so deep."

I can't fucking breathe.

"*STOP IT!*"

The scream rips out of me like something primal. Like something I didn't know I was still carrying inside. My hands are shaking. My chest is heaving. I feel sick. I feel like I've been punched in the throat and kicked in the gut and left to bleed out all over again.

Because suddenly, it all fits.

And it hurts so, so bad.

I believed the lies. I believed what they told me, what *he* told me, the man who ripped me from my family and treated me like I was nothing. The man who stood smiling as he told me Yulian had fed him every secret I ever whispered to him.

And now I'm standing here, staring at a map of pain carved into the body of the person who only ever tried to save me.

And I *didn't believe him.*

I fall back a step, like I've been hit.

My knees give out. My hand flies to my mouth. My skin is too tight. My lungs won't expand.

I *can't breathe.*

"Vaughn," Yulian says, finally, gently. I briefly register him putting his shirt back on, as if he's trying to shield me from what I've just seen. And that's what breaks me.

Because he should hate me. He should scream at me, spit in my face for doubting him. But instead, he says my name like he *still* cares.

My vision swims.

"No," I whisper, voice cracking. "No, no, no-"

Because this can't be true.

Because if it is, then I've hated him all these years for something he *didn't do*.

Because if it is, then I let the real monster turn me into one.

-

Yulian

-

Vaughn is on the floor like the breath's been beaten out of him, eyes wide and glazed with something beyond pain, something raw and bleeding and human. And I just stand here, chest bare, breathing hard, watching him fall apart because of me.

For a second, just a second, I wonder if I made a mistake. If showing him everything, exposing the rot under my skin, was worth shattering him like this. He looks like the world's ended. Like I've just taken the last lie he was clinging to and gutted it in front of him. Maybe I did. Maybe he needed it. Maybe we both did.

I take a step toward him, cautious, as if I'm approaching a wounded animal.

"Vaughn," I say, as softly as I think I'm capable of.

He flinches when I kneel. Like my voice stabs.

My hand moves without thinking, reaching toward him, but the second my fingertips brush his shoulder, he jerks back violently, shouting, "Don't touch me!"

I freeze. His voice splits the air like a whip. But still… I can't leave him like this. I won't.

"Don't," he gasps again, but this time quieter. Broken. Begging. He's trembling all over.

I move anyway.

I wrap my arms around him, gently, slowly, ignoring the way he tries to resist for half a second before giving up. His fists don't even hit me when they collapse against my chest. He just sinks, like something

unspoken inside him has crumbled entirely. And I hold him. I don't say anything yet. I just let him fall into me like a wave that's lost the strength to crash.

He breathes like he's never known how. Ragged. Harsh. Human.

My hand rises to the back of his neck, fingers threading through his hair, gripping it tight, and I force him to look at me, really look at me.

"I know you blame yourself," I say, voice low, firm, steady. "I see it. I know it. You think it's your fault for believing it. For hating me. For not knowing. For not *wanting* to know."

His eyes fill with something that makes my chest cave in.

"But it's not your fault, Vaughn. I understand. I understand why you hated me. I understand why you were cruel and cold and distant and angry. Because I would've been the same if I thought what you thought."

He closes his eyes.

"We both fucked up," I go on, not letting him look away, "We let silence rot between us, when we could have known the truth so much sooner. You may have held onto your anger, and for valid reason, but I never once stopped to question your accusations of betrayal, trickery and manipulation. But it's done now. It's over. You *know* the truth. *We* know the truth."

He nods, once, barely there. His breathing steadies but his body still shakes.

“Of course it’s not fixed,” I whisper. “Of course, there’s still a hell of a lot we need to talk about. But-“ I grip his jaw tighter, making him gasp as his eyes lock onto mine “-like I’ve told you before, You. Are. Mine, Vaughn. And I am yours. Nothing’s going to change that. *Never*.”

His jaw clenches. His throat bobs as he swallows down something he doesn’t say.

“You have two choices,” I say. “You either let go of it, or I’ll rip it out of you myself. Because I’m done watching you hate yourself. You won’t be able to fully commit while you still hold onto it. And nothing is going to stop me from having what’s mine. Not again.”

He laughs, a single breathless sound, almost a sob. Then he nods, eyes wet and unsure. “I… I still have a lot of issues,” he says hoarsely. “A lot of shit I need to work through.”

“I know,” I say. “And I’ll be there. Every fucking step of the way.”

His mouth tugs into the faintest hint of a smile. It’s tired. Faint. But it’s real. Then, just as quickly, it drops again. He lifts a hand, tentative, slow, and places it flat on my chest, right where the old, hidden scars run beneath the ink. His eyes darken with guilt.

“Don’t think about it right now,” I murmur, taking his hand in mine, pressing my lips to his knuckles. “Not tonight.”

He doesn’t answer, but his hand stays there, like he’s anchoring himself to something solid.

After a beat, I say, “So, are you finally willing to see where this goes? To give us a fucking chance? Here’s a hint: you don’t have a choice. So say yes.”

He looks at me. Really looks at me. And then, he nods.

“Yes.”

“Good,” I whisper. “Because I’ve been waiting to do this for a long time.”

And then I kiss him.

Chapter End Notes

firstly, thank you for reading <3 i hope you enjoyed.
secondly, i want to say that i know from some comments i get and asks that not everyone is going to be happy with the decision ive made. a few people seem to want the situation to sort of flip so that its vaughn chasing yulian instead and i totally understand why, but from my perspective, it would simply be out of character. the only time yulian was willing to let vaughn go/ refuse to be with him (and only temporarily) was when vaughn tricked him in that warehouse AND he needed no distractions to ensure he did everything he could for his sister to come to the island. that was it. otherwise, yulian is obsessed with vaughn, he doesnt want to be without him. he knows that there is somethign stopping vaughn from wanting to be with him, and this is him finally figuring it out. and please understand, vaughn did not do it out of spite, he genuinely beleived that yulian did all those horrible things and got people he cared about killed and badly hurt, it makes sense (to me) as to why he would refuse to be with yulian over it. and still, it hasnt fully prevented it, as they have obiouslt given into desire a few times. so this isnt a situation where, from yulians pov, he has gone 'omg vaughn has been cruel for a dumb reason and now i know the truth im going to refuse to be with him', but a situation in which they have both figured out the truth and what truly happened, and both are able to

understand that neither of them were wholly in the wrong for it. and in terms of them 'getting together' at the end (i wouldnt actually describe it as that, but i hope you know what i mean), the reason it seems so 'quick' is because they have literallu been titering on the edge of it for so long. theyve nearly given in over and over but couldnt because of this one thing. theyve now figured out and 'moved past' this one thing and there is no longer that thing stopping them. from the way ive written their characters, they literally cannot resisit each other lol.
i hope that makes sense and no one is too upset with how it ended up. the actual scene on the cliff isnt over, the first half of next chap will also continue on the cliff, so there is more to be said between them.
im going to try very hard to finish and upload it tomorrow and then ill hopefully take a little break before the one after.
thank you for your support, it measn more than you could ever know <3

Chapter Nineteen

Chapter Notes

> hi its me again,
> spent all day writing this one too lol. however, i have work the next couple days and then im actually moving again (which i had totally forgotten about lol) on tuesday so unless i find some time, i probably woont be able to start writing again until like wednesday next week, so i really wanted to finish this chap to conclude the forest scene.
> thank you for all the kind words on the last chap, i will get around to replying to comments, i just wanted to finish this chap first.
> enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

Vaughn's mouth parts beneath mine like he's been waiting for this just as long as long as I have, years of pain and silence and rage crumbling into ash the moment our lips meet. We may have fooled around before, but this… it's not like before. Before, it had teeth, anger, heat and bitterness tangled in every breath. Before, it was a weapon, a challenge, something we used to hurt as much as feel. But now? Now it's, fuck, it's still fire, but it's the kind that warms instead of burns. Lustful. Desperate. Breathless.

I groan into him as his teeth graze my bottom lip, and I grin because of course he's still fighting me for control. Even now. Even when he's trembling. Even when he's unravelling in my arms. The bastard.

I shove him back, until he is lying flat on the earth beneath me again, only for him to growl low in his throat and shove me right back, flipping us over so he's on top. Whereas before this would have meant genuine anger, frustration and hostility, now it just feels… playful. I

feel his smile through our kisses as our bodies collide, twisting frantically, our hands everywhere at once.

Fingers dig and drag, clutching at skin like we're both terrified the other will disappear if we don't hold tight enough. His nails rake down my spine, hard, and I laugh, genuinely, breathlessly, because I love how it still hurts. I love that his fire is still there, and ready.

I drag my mouth down his jaw, nipping at the sharp line of it, and he tilts his head to give me more. More, always more. My hands are already under his shirt, greedy and unapologetic as I peel it up over his head, baring inch after inch of pale skin. His chest rises and falls like he's run a marathon, and his pupils are blown wide, his eyes looking darker against the now dim sky.

"You trying to win something?" I murmur against his throat, biting down just enough to leave a mark. Mine. *Mine.*

He doesn't answer, just grabs *my* shirt and yanks. I let him. I let him take it off, let him see the ink twisting across my skin again, but this time I don't flinch. This time I *want* him to look. And he does, his gaze dragging over the serpent, but not like before, not with horror. With hunger. With something that looks beautifully close to reverence.

His fingertips trail oh so delicately over the tattoo, his eyes catching on each scar. I should probably reassure him again, ensure that he doesn't get caught up again in his own mind. But frankly, my cock is way too hard right now for me to bother, so instead I just use the wrist on my chest to yank him down toward me and whisper right into his ear.

"I want to fuck you, Mishka."

His entire body shudders and I hear him lose his breath. Whether it's from my crude words or the use of the nickname I know he can no longer deny his love for, I don't know. But I also don't care, because unlike last time, he doesn't recoil in disgust at the idea.

Rather, he gazes down at me with such lustful, shameless eyes, that all I can think about is how tight his ass is going to feel clenched around my cock as he screams my name.

Then he leans back down again, whispering in my ear the same way I did to him. "Promises, promises," he breaths, a wild grin on his face.

My head spins and I growl, biting on his neck and I hear him let out a deep groan.

Then we're stumbling again, upwards, this time, standing up in the middle of this open space, right on the edge of the cliff. The cool night air hits our sweat-damp skin and neither of us even pause. We don't hesitate, don't even have to verbally communicate it, but we both quickly dispatch of the rest of our clothes, until we stand in only our underwear.

I half-lift, half-drag him across the grassy floor until we reach my car, and I spin him, slam him roughly against the hood. His back arches, hissing at the chill of the metal, and I cage him in with my body, pressing close, *so close*, chest to chest, heartbeat to heartbeat.

Only our underwear separates us now, and even that feels like too much.

I thrust my hips forward, grinding our clothed cocks together.

“Oh, fuck,” Vaughn moans, his head tilting back toward the sky.

God, I love the way he moans for me.

I tease my lips down his throat before bite down, adding to the bright red marks I’ve already left there. He blows out a hitched breath and I swallow it down, adding it to my long-term memory. Fucking hell, I’ll never get bored of this man. Of his taste, his body, his mouth.

I capture it again with my lips, feeling his own mouth swollen against me, wet with spit. I can practically taste his lust on my tongue as it battles for dominance with his.

His hand, which had been resting on my back, reaches around and grabs the bulge between my legs, prompting me to let out a deep groan into his mouth. He moves his hand up and down, rubbing me, giving me a fraction of the friction my cock is craving.

But it’s not enough, nowhere near. His touch may light my body on fire, but I won’t be wholly satisfied until I’m balls deep inside him. I feel his other hand slide into my hair, pulling and tugging on it, turning it into a mess. I absorb every sting of pain from it. He can fight me as much as he wants, but it won’t change that he’s *mine*.

I fucking own him. Just like he owns me.

“Shit, baby,” I groan, “I want to eat you up. Claim every inch of your fucking skin. Mark you all over so everyone knows your fucking mine.”

Vaughn grins, his eyes low and glazed. “Prove it.”

Then, he trails his fingers over the top of the waistband of my boxers, teasing for a moment, before he finally dips them inside. “And get this fucking thing off.”

Well, what my Mishka wants, my Mishka gets.

I pull back from him, just for a moment, to slide my last piece of clothing down my legs. He takes the opportunity to do the same. My cock springs out, long and thick, veins displaying how desperately I need him.

When I try to step back toward him, however, he grabs me by the waist first, pulling me toward him until our whole bodies are pressed against one another.

If my brain even had an inch of common sense left in it, I would consider the fact that we are in a completely public place, naked as the day we were born, and about to fuck over the hood of my car. But, unfortunately, my brain doesn’t work right when it comes to Vaughn.

Using our closeness to his advantage, Vaughn flips us around, capturing my lips in his as it becomes my turn to be pressed up against the car, the cold metal digging into my hips. His hands roam all over me, as if he can’t get enough.

“You want me?” he asks seductively.

I nod my head, breathlessly. He grins as his hand trails down my chest, going lower and lower.

“I want you too,” he replies, “let me show you how much.”

He drops to his knees in front of me and I instantly reach out both arms beside me to grab onto the car, using it to keep me standing. The sight of Vaughn before has me almost coming on the spot.

He starts by licking up my thigh agonizingly slowly, nibbling on my skin as he goes. This has got to be a form of torture, I’m so hard I could practically burst.

Finally, he reaches where I want him most. Vaughn’s hand wraps around the base of my dick, only covering just over half of it. He strokes me up and down, using my dripping pre-cum to make the slide easier.

I remove one of my hands from the hood and use it instead to grab him by the jaw, forcing him to look up at me, but he doesn’t stop jerking me off. His lips are swollen and red, while his eyes are glossy and wide. “I want to feel you choke on my cock,” I tell him.

Vaughn uses the other hand that isn’t wrapped around me to gently grab my own that’s gripping his face, then, without having to use any force, he pulls it away from his jaw and moves it to on top of his head, letting me slide it through his fluffy strands.

Then, finally, he leans forward and closes his mouth over the head of my dick. I immediately let out a deep groan, straight from my chest. I can feel his whole-body trembling between my legs, not from nerves or fear, but from how worked up he is.

He continues his way down my cock, taking more and more of me in until he reaches the point where his hand is. Starting slow, he begins moving his mouth up and down, getting faster and faster as I get more

and more tense.

“You’re so good at this baby,” I sigh, “so fucking good to me.”

At that, he moans around my cock and the vibration from his mouth has my eyes rolling to the back of my head. Eventually, after working me over for what feels like *hours*, he falls into a fast rhythm, his head bobbing back and forth, my moans echoing around the empty green space.

His other hand, which isn’t squeezing my dick just right, has moved to rest on my hip, giving him some balance. The sounds he’s unintentionally making, the wet slaps and gulps as I watch my dick move in and out of his mouth practically has my mouth watering, especially as I picture what it will look like when I move my cock in and out of his other hole.

Never in a million years would I have guessed this is how that conversation was going to end, but I’m so fucking glad for it.

His tongue slides all over my length, tracing the veins and sucking hard. He occasionally chokes on it, but it doesn’t slow him down, doesn’t even make him pause. He periodically moves the hand cupping the end of my dick down to fondle my balls and I find myself right on the edge of my orgasm. I look down at Vaughn and all I can think is *minemineminemine*.

And better yet, I don’t think he’d even argue against it anymore.

Finally, as I feel myself almost finishing, I use my grip on his hair to pull him off me. He looks up at me, drool dripping down his chin, mouth open as he deeply breathes in the air he had been missing.

I pull him up toward me, as his legs shake like a fawn standing for the first time. My arms wrap around him as I capture him in a deep kiss, tasting the saltiness of myself on his tongue.

“Sorry, Mishka, can’t come just yet. I need to be inside of you first,” I whisper into him.

“Well get on with it then,” he grins back, rubbing his erection against my stomach.

Vaugh yelps as I suddenly grab him by the hips and lift him up. His legs instinctively go up to wrap around my waist, and his arms around my neck, but I quickly spin us around and place him down high enough on the hood of the car that his legs dangle over the edge, not touching the floor.

He smiles at me, cheeks red. He leans in and places a quick few pecks on my mouth, but before I let him take it any further again, I pull away from him.

“One second, baby.”

I quickly run to the passenger’s side of my car and pull the door open, reaching into the glovebox and pulling out the unopened tube of lube in there. My hand hesitates over the pack of condoms for a moment, before I decide against it, and close the glove box. Tonight, I’ll feel him completely around me, bare and whole.

And so what if, despite only having this car like a week, I’ve already put lube and condoms in it? A guy can dream, and clearly, dreams *do* come true.

I walk back around the front of the car, lube in hand. I stop for a moment, a few feet across from Vaughn, taking him in. Totally naked, legs spread and thick cock leaking against his stomach.

He's fucking exquisite.

"Well don't just stand there," he smirks, "make me feel good."

Oh, fuck *yes*.

I stride toward him, grabbing him by the throat and using my grip to push him backward so he's almost flat on the hood, only slightly held up by his elbows resting behind him. I begin kissing all over his neck, listening to him groan, loud and unashamed.

My mouth trails downward onto his chest, before suddenly wrapping its lips around one of his nipples.

"Holy shit," Vaughn shouts, "Yulian…"

Hearing my name drop from his mouth like a prayer is like having every wish I ever asked for come true.

I continue worshipping his body, licking, sucking his nipples and the areas around them. I switch between the two again and again. Vaughn's body writhes beneath me, clawing at my upper back as I used my hands which are gripped on his hips to hold him in place.

As I do so, I slowly remove one hand from him and instead wrap it around his dark red cock, leaking all over his stomach. He practically sobs at finally being touched there. Not wanting him to cum until I'm inside him, my hand moves leisurely, giving him just enough pressure to keep him going, but not to go over that edge.

Deciding he's ready, I pull back and grab the bottle of lube I had placed on the hood beside him. He watches me, his eyes wide. I pour a generous amount on my fingers and move my hand to between his legs, keeping eye contact the entire time.

Then, ever so gently, I push the first finger in, just to the first knuckle. He gasps immediately, his back arching in surprise. I wait a moment, allowing him to get used to the feeling of having something inside him down there for the first time.

After a few seconds, I push my finger the rest of the way in. I barely allow him any reprieve before I'm thrusting the finger in and out of him, watching as he throws his head back and groans under his breath.

His ass clenches around my finger and my breath hitches as I think about him doing the same around my dick. I use my other hand, not the one inside him, to wrap around his cock again, slowly stroking him up and down.

Vaughn's groans get louder as I keep going until he finally grits out, "more. Fucking more."

I don't hesitate to honour his wish. Sliding a second finger alongside the first pretty quickly, I instantly begin thrusting them both. My fingers fuck him fast and my hand squeezing his cock matches the pace. But I don't yet add another finger, even though I think he'll need one to be fully prepared for me.

It is his first time, and I'm not exactly small, he'll need all the prep he can get.

"So fucking sexy, Mishka," I groan.

"Shut the fuck up," he growls, "and give me *more*."

I chuckle at his demand. Nonetheless, I give him what he needs.

I feel feral staring down at his flush body, covered in bite marks and hickeys. All signs that he belongs to me, that I've claimed him. I have no doubt I look the exact same.

I slide a third finger in, and Vaughn begins moaning consistently. His eyes are closed and his head thrown back. It's like I'm not even here to him; I'm just a vessel to deliver his pleasure in however he demands it. And I think it's the most erotic thing I've ever seen.

Vaughn's groans grow louder and louder until he's right on the edge of an orgasm. And just before I push him over it, I stop, pulling my fingers out.

He growls, his eyes shooting open and looking at me. "What the fuck-"

I bend down and lick a single stripe on his cock, from balls to head. His words collapse into a mumble for a second before he catches his breath.

“Sorry, Mishka,” I grin, “can’t have you coming too soon.”

His hand shoots down and grabs me tightly by the chin where it still hovers near his dick. He wrenches my face upward until he’s looking me straight in the eye. They blaze with lust and desire.

“Then *fuck me*.”

Holy shit. This man is going to be the fucking death of me. Death via my-man-is-too-hot. Not a bad way to go.

I grin at him. “God, you drive me absolutely crazy, baby.”

His sly smirk looks back at me. “Yulian, if you don’t get your cock in me in the next thirty seconds, I’ll show you what it really means to be driven crazy.”

For a moment, I almost want to refuse him to see exactly what he means. But my cock really, really wants to be inside him. I guess I’ll have to let him drive me completely crazy another day.

I place the head of my cock at his entrance and his ass wiggles against me. I thrust up his crack a few times, over his hole, coating myself in lube.

Then, I thrust all the way in. I expect him to yelp, or scream, but instead, his mouth just drops open completely, as if I’ve totally taken his breath away and he can’t find anymore.

His hands, which had been scrambling on the hood of the car for something to grab, now reach down to where my hands are gripping his waist again. He wraps his hands around my wrists tightly, as if they're the only thing keeping him in place.

I can't help but think back to that time in my room, where he refused to let me inside him because of the resentment he held, and compare it to now, where he's commanded, practically begged, for me to fuck him. It's like the final proof that, even if we still have a lot to work on, the first step has been made in making him truly accept what we are.

I only give him a few seconds to adjust. It might be his first time, but I know my Mishka, and he'll enjoy a little pain with his pleasure. I pull out again and rapidly thrust back in.

As if finally finding some air, Vaughn grunts out an "oh fuck," as I build into a steady pace.

"God, you were fucking made for me," I groan, "only me."

My pace gets quicker, and Vaughn's moans grow louder. His eyes are hooded, meeting mine through a cloud of lust.

"Always me," I continue, "will always be only me. Mine. Forever."

I'm practically babbling at this point, consumed by the pleasure inside of me. Vaughn is similar, gasping and groaning over and over as I thrust into him repeatedly.

"You feel so damn good, baby," I say.

Vaughn's hands tighten around my wrists as his eyes narrow up at me. "How about… you stop wasting so much energy on your mouth… and use it instead to fuck. Me. Harder."

I go feral. Letting my mouth hang open only to gasp as much air in as I can, I begin using my hold on Vaughn to move his body toward me on each thrust, meeting him halfway every time. He takes his legs, which had been spread apart, and wraps them tightly around my waist, holding me to him.

I own him. Every inch of him is mine. It's a thrilling piece of knowledge that drives me mad, as I just get faster and faster until I'm in a consistent rhythm of pounding into him over and over again.

"Touch me," Vaughn mutters, his back arching the small amount I'll allow.

"What was that, Mishka?" I say, even though I heard him perfectly. I want to hear him *tell* me what he wants.

"Fucking touch me!" he shouts, and I comply, wrapping one of my hands around his cock again. It's harder to move his body to mine over and over again with only one hand, but he's practically fucking himself on my cock anyway, the way he pushes his body down repeatedly.

The car is shaking slightly with each thrust, and I wouldn't be surprised if there's a dent in the hood when we're done. But I don't care. I'm *fucking* Vaughn Morozov. The sound of our skin slapping together fills the air as I feel my orgasm approaching. And by the way his whole body is trembling, I can tell Vaughn is too.

I fuck him fast, hard and deep. He feels so damn hot. His grunts are like music to my ears.

"Feels so good," Vaughn mumbles, "I'm going to cum. Oh fuck, Yulian, I'm going to come."

My hips stutter for just a moment, before I go even rougher. I growl, jerking his cock in time with my thrusts until finally, I lean over to be closer to his face and whisper:

"Come for me, baby."

He moans his loudest yet, cum spurting out of his cock onto my hand and his chest. At the same time, he clenches down hard on my cock, and it's enough to send me over the edge too.

My thrusts don't falter as my vision goes white, my orgasm hitting me like a fucking truck, the best I've ever had, without a doubt. I feel like an animal, growling through it as he matches me like a beast, still fucking himself on my cock through his own orgasm. I push as deep inside him as I can go, dumping all my come deep in his ass. I feel him twitch at the feeling.

I keep going until we both reach the very end, even slipping slightly into overstimulation territory, prompting a whine to slip from Vaughn's throat. I slow to a stop, breathing heavy. I watch Vaughn's chest rise up and down rapidly, his eyes closed and a sheen of sweat across his whole body despite the cold end-of-winter air.

Giving us both a few moments to calm down, I eventually slide gently out of him and despite how depleted I feel, it doesn't stop my dick from twitching at the sight of my cum dripping out of Vaughn's hole.

He gazes up at me through his lidded eyes and I gently pull him further down the hood until his body up to his waist is hanging off. Then, I dip down to capture his lips in a fierce, passionate kiss, with his own mouth meeting me halfway.

Our fervent kiss soon turns lazy from our exhaustion, until it turns into a slow, sluggish make out session.

I'm finally brought out of my trance as I feel him shiver beneath me. And this time, I can tell it's from the cold. He's still stark naked, after all. I release his lips and press my forehead to his. Vaughn looks me straight in the eye, a bright, almost shy smile on his lips.

"That was…" Vaughn trails off, "nice."

I raise an eyebrow at him. "Just nice?"

He rolls his eyes. "Okay, a lot more than nice." His eyes shine under the moonlight. "Thank you," he says quietly.

"Right back at you, Mishka," I say, smiling back.

I feel him shiver again.

"Come on," I gesture, "let's get in the car and turn the heating on before our dicks freeze off."

Vaughn laughs, and attempts to stand up, though his legs are, understandably, very shaky. I help him, holding him to my side as I move him to the backseat. I reach into the front and grab some tissues, wiping down whatever cum is still left on both him and I, before turning the car on and putting the heat on full blast.

I quickly hop and out and grab all the clothes we had left strewn about the grassy area. They're freezing to the touch, unsurprisingly, but they'll hopefully warm up soon in the car.

I jog back to the car, clothes in hand, and chuck them into the back with Vaughn, who's happily waiting for me. Then, I climb in with him.

-

Vaughn

-

The space around us is entirely dark, only briefly lit by Yulian's cars headlights and the stars and moon overhead. It's freezing outside by now, as it is the middle of the night, but the car is nice and toasty.

My back rests against the door in the back seat and Yulian lies between my legs, his head resting against my lower stomach. My hand moves slowly through his hair, fingers weaving through the soft strands, brushing them back over and over again like I'm trying to soothe a feral animal. My other hand rests on his chest, and one of his own is linked with it.

Yulian hums, low in his throat, content and lazy, eyes closed like he might fall asleep there if I let him. There's something about the weight of him against me that feels grounding. Dangerous. Safe. I don't know how it can be both.

His trousers are back on, half-buttoned and low on his hips, but he's got his jacket draped over his chest like a blanket. I'm now wearing just my boxers and his top, the hem sitting long over my thighs. I should feel stupid for putting it on, for letting him see me in something that smells like him, but I don't. It's warm. Familiar. Comforting in a way that before, I never would have admitted.

The silence is so comfortable. It's light and relaxing, something I never thought I would experience in Yulian's presence again. It's like we've both been holding our breath for too long and now we're trying to figure out how to exist in the aftermath of whatever the hell just happened. My chest still aches from the adrenaline. From the way he touched me like he was starving. From the way I let him.

I lean down and press a kiss to the top of his head, gentle, almost automatic. His hair tickles my mouth. I see him smile on my stomach and he gives my hand a squeeze.

But, no matter how good I feel right now, I know what needs to happen. "We should probably talk."

He grimaces. "Guess I probably should have seen that coming."

I lift my hand that's holding with his, untangling it for a moment to lightly slap his chest, before grabbing for it again, to let him know that I'm not actually upset. "I'm serious. We just- we barely even finished figuring out the truth and we immediately jumped each other like dogs in heat. Maybe we should've... I don't know. Talked more. First."

Yulian sighs. "I don't know, that definitely felt like it was long overdue. Plus, did you say dog in heat? Cause I'm pretty sure they do

it multiple times before the heats finished." He looks up at me with a mischievous eye and I lightly hit him again.

"I'm serious, Yulian," I groan.

He snorts, "okay, fine. I won't agree that we didn't have to have the greatest sex in history, but I suppose that now we've finished, some more talking might be in order."

My mouth drops a little at how easily he gave in. I thought I'd have to push a little more to be honest. "That sounds very mature for you," I joke, "Who are you and what have you done with Yulian?"

He twists his neck to look up at me, smirking lazily. "What can I say? Your ass has single-handedly made me a better man. Or should I say double-cheeked?"

"Yulian!"

"Okay, okay." He sighs, and a serious expression seems to actually come across his face. "Half the problem in all of this has been a lack of communication. I'm trying to do better."

My heart skips a beat at what he says, and I'm genuinely touched by the maturity in his words. For a moment, I just stare at him.

"Good," I finally reply, "because I know I messed up too. I'm going to try and be better as well."

He nods, more serious now. “Okay, then. Can I say something?”

I tense a little. “Yeah. Go on.”

“At the time, when we were over there,” he gestures to the spot we had our conversation, “I was just focused on making you believe me and trying to make you feel better. But it actually really annoys me off that you never tried to talk to me,” he says, blunt and unflinching. “Not once. Your reaction to everything, always, is rage. Violence. You think I betrayed you, and your first instinct is to ruin me. Not confront me. Not ask. Just… burn everything down.”

I stiffen underneath him. My hand pauses in his hair.

“And I know that you had been lied to. Big time,” he continues, “so I do understand why, but all it would have taken is one conversation. It *did* take only one conversation. And now we’ve lost eight years, and it all seems so- so- stupid. And yes, I could have tried to have the conversation myself, and I acknowledge that, but, honestly, I don’t think you would have let me. You were always too consumed by rage.”

I blink a few times, slowly. His words do sting a little, but I think it’s just because I know he’s right.

“I know,” I say after a beat. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I really am working on it. I just-”

The words catch in my throat. I have to force them out.

“After I got out… after the basement… I had one conversation with my

father about it. Just one."

Yulian goes still. He doesn't interrupt.

"We talked about the fact that I gave up the addresses. Obviously, he knew straight away that I had to have been the reason they got leaked. And how that led to your dad bombing the buildings. Bombing my home. I expected him to be furious. But he just... looked at me and said it was okay. That no one blamed me. That after everything I'd been through, the torture, the isolation, the months down there, anyone would have broken eventually. That I had every right."

Yulian doesn't speak. But I feel his hand tighten, just slightly, on my leg.

"I didn't correct him," I say, voice hoarse. "I didn't have the courage to tell him that it wasn't like that. That it wasn't months of isolation, it wasn't the torture, it was simply trusting the son of the man who took me in the first place. I gave it up willingly. There was no duress, I *offered*. I handed it over because I trusted you. Because I would've done anything for you."

My voice cracks on the last part. I hate that it does.

"I couldn't tell them," I whisper. "To this day, my parents don't know. They think I held out all that time. That I was brave. What happens if they ever find out the truth? What if they don't forgive me?"

A long silence.

Then Yulian sighs. "I'm sorry."

“Don’t,” I say quickly, shaking my head. “I don’t want you to apologize. It is not your fault. I just- I need you to understand. I need you to know how deep it went. How much it ruined me. I am sorry for not talking to you, I’m not trying to invalidate your feelings in any way. But that basement…” I take a deep breath, “it destroyed me.”

He nods slowly, but I can see the storm behind his eyes. He hates this, seeing how much pain I’m in. His squeezes mine again, and I appreciate the comfort.

I want to tell him more. Something else is building in my throat. Something about why I lash out, why I explode, why I self-destruct at the first sign of *him*.

But the words die before they reach my mouth. I can’t say it. I can’t give him all of me yet.

So instead, I blurt, “I want to take you somewhere.”

He blinks. “What?”

I sit up slightly, shifting so I’m no longer quite so tangled around him. “I want to drive somewhere. On my bike. I want you to follow me.”

His brows lift, suspicious but intrigued. “That’s ominous as hell.”

I offer a half-smile. “I know.”

He watches me for a second longer, then sighs like he's already regretting it. "Er- yeah, sure. Let's just put the rest of our clothes on. I don't want anyone other than me seeing you without clothes from now on."

I'd roll my eyes at him, but the thought of others seeing *him* without clothes, even just shirtless, makes me boil. So, I suppose we're pretty even.

He sits up, stretches, the moonlight catching his bare chest where the jacket has slipped down onto his lap. He looks beautiful in a way that makes my stomach twist, feral and lean and wild-eyed, like something dangerous that I can't stop chasing.

Maybe I don't have to.

-

My tires crunch softly over gravel as I slow the bike to a stop. The trees here grow tall and close together, pressing in like quiet sentinels, filtering the moonlight into silvery streaks that spill across the forest floor. I stand pretty quickly after cutting the engine, letting the silence settle around me.

Unfortunately, the ride here, sitting on my bike, was not very comfortable.

Behind me, I hear the low rumble of Yulian's engine as he pulls up. His car door shuts, and I turn to look at him. However, he's looking at the small building nestled among the trees. The cottage is simple, the roof pitched sharply against the weather, chimney sticking up into the trees.

Yulian walks up beside me, his breath puffing out in a little cloud. “What is this place?”

I take off my helmet, running a hand through my hair to shake off the static and nerves. “It’s mine,” I say. “I bought it over the Christmas break. Had it redone. Figured it’d be a good place to come to when I need to be alone this semester.”

Not to mention, if all the other Heathens got some secret place they could take their partners to hook up, then I should too.

His eyes narrow slightly. “So, if it’s where you want to be alone, then why did you bring me? Not that I’m complaining, I know you love my presence, so being around me probably doesn’t count.”

I roll my eyes. “Well, I wanted to ask you something. Or maybe just… say something. I know we haven’t figured everything out yet. We’re still… working through it. And I don’t know what this is exactly between us, but I know I don’t want to fuck it up. And I don’t think it would be a very good idea for others to know about us. I hope you don’t mind.”

Yulian doesn’t speak, just waits.

“So,” I go on, “I thought this could be our place. I’m not saying we have to live here or whatever. Just… if we want to be together, and I do, but not have to worry about getting seen or anything, we could come here. Just us. For now.”

His face is unreadable for a second. Then he smirks faintly. “As much as I’d love to tell the world your mine, I’d say our family situations are

not yet ready to handle that. It's okay, I never thought that telling people would be a good idea, not yet anyway."

I smile and kiss him on the cheek, though as I pull away, he grabs my jaw and places one right on my mouth.

He studies me for a moment longer, then nods. "Alright. Give me the grand tour, then."

I nod once and push the door open.

Inside, the space is small but clean. Pale wooden floors, fresh white walls, new windows that let in shafts of light. There's a tiny living area with a soft grey couch and a bookshelf filled with some of my favourite books from back home. The kitchen is barely big enough for one person, but it has all the essentials. Down the short hallway is a single bedroom, and a bathroom just opposite it. It's simple.

Yulian walks through it slowly, gaze trailing over the details. He kicks off his shoes and drags his fingers along the back of the couch, pokes his head into the bathroom, then reappears and says, "It's cute."

I roll my eyes. "Don't."

"I mean it. Like something out of a movie. Some brooding dark-haired antiheroes with trauma issues hiding in the woods."

"Oh, shut it."

He gives me a crooked grin, then steps forward and pulls me in by the front of my jacket, his jacket, really, since he insisted that since I'd be on the bike and he in the car, I'd need it more than him, and kisses me. A soft one, then another, firmer. His mouth is warm and sure and familiar now. Each press of it steals a little more of my breath, until I find my hands gripping his waist, anchoring myself.

When he pulls back, he presses his forehead against my own, closing his eyes. He's quiet for a moment. "While we're still kind of on the whole communicating thing-"

"We will always be on the communicating thing, Yulian."

"-I did want you to know, that I really hated waking up alone, you know."

My heart skips a beat.

"That night a few months ago. When we were…together, in my room. We said we'd talk the next morning, and then you were gone. It really pissed me off. Like, enough to burn your annex building down. Which, like, I'm not sorry about, by the way. Cause that was totally deserved."

I blink. I'm going to choose to ignore that last part. My chest tightens. "Yulian-"

He holds up a hand. "It's okay. I get why you left. I mean- what you thought I did to your family- well, let's just say I get it. But still, all I had was a note. Don't do that again."

He leans in close to my ear. “Or I might have to take it out on your ass, this time.”

My cheeks go red, but I have no doubt he’s telling the truth, especially after what happened tonight.

I swallow, shame curling low in my gut. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I really am.”

“Good. Never again, you understand?”

“I won’t.” I wrap my arms fully around him, pulling him close. “I swear. You’ll never wake up alone again. Not if I can help it.”

His arms slip around my waist, and we kiss again, deeper this time. I can feel him smiling against my mouth, and the sound he makes when I bite lightly at his bottom lip is enough to make my head spin.

Then he pulls back just slightly, his breath hitching. “You know,” he murmurs, eyes glinting, “going back to the dogs in heat thing, they really do go a few rounds before they’re finished.”

I bark a laugh, my head dropping to his shoulder as I groan. “You’re unbelievable.”

He grins. “What? I’m just saying. You’re the one that brought it up in the first place. You can’t blame me for expecting another go after that.”

I kiss him again, hard this time, and he stumbles back a step. We're both laughing as we make our way down the hall, bumping into the doorframe and half-tripping over each other's shoes. The bedroom is dimly lit, the sheets turned down, and when we fall into the bed, things quickly get more tense.

He rolls on top of me, then I roll back over him. We wrestle for dominance like we always do, mouths clashing, hands greedy. He's beautiful under me, mussed hair, flushed cheeks, that spark of something wild in his eyes that's always dared me to want him more than I should. And I do. God, I do.

Thinking back to that night he mentioned, I remember something he said.

"You know," I start, leaning close to his ear quietly, "that night you talked about. I seem to remember you describing some *very* dirty things that you thought I wanted. And when I accused *you* of wanting those things, you agreed with me."

I hear his breath hitch beneath me.

"But," my voice is just a whisper now, "you said you'd only do them once I admitted to wanting them first. And, well, I can't think of a more obvious way to admit than letting you fuck me."

I growl out the last few words, and I feel him harden beneath me.

"Which means, this time, it's *my* turn to be on top."

Chapter End Notes

so i hope you enjoyed as always!

i am a woman so writing a gay sex scene was not the easiest so apologies if it wasn't amzing lmaoooo.
ive had quite a few asks on tumblr about getting domestic/fluffy stuff and i hope that this chap was a good start lol. i acc had a lot of fun writing the car scene! (as in when they were in it, not on it, though that was fun too)
one thing i really wanted to capture this chapter was that vaughn is very good at being a 'boyfriend'. obvs they arent there yet, but he was quick to try and establish good communication, was affectionate in the way a bf would be and he shared his special place with yulian. i was back and forth on how i should write vaughn after he knew the truth and decided he wanted to try being with yulian, if i should have him still being very obtuse etc, but then i thought about it and he realised that he was in a long-term, committed and serious relationship for many years. whatever we may think of camilla, i did write them as, until the end, being a pretty healthy couple. this means that i do imagine vaughn has a lot of experience in making a relaitionship work and he would know how importnant communication is, hence why he pushed for it with yulian. he also grew up watchinig his parents as his standard. so now that he and yulian have finally gotten to a place where they can test the waters on what a 'relationship' is like, and vaughn, after trying to stay away for so long is eager to finally let himself have what he wants, he is more than prepared for how to handle it.
anyway,like i said, it will be a while before i update again cause i will be a bit busy (but even if i werent, i would still take a break lmao.) so i hope this is enough to satiate you guys for now. ill still be answering stuff on my tumblr when i have the time so feel free to keep sending asks, and i will also get round to replying to comments on here too <3
thank you for all your support <3

Chapter Twenty

Chapter Notes

hii everyone.
enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vaughn

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Yulian's entire body quivers beneath me.

Since I announced my intention to fuck him, as promised when I let him do the same to me, he's been more eager than ever before.

My mouth is insistent on his, all biting kisses and teasing licks that, judging by the way his limbs don't seem to know what to do with themselves, are making his brain short-circuit. His hands are everywhere, gripping my hips, tracing the ridges of my spine, fisting the fabric of my shirt as if it personally offends him that it's still on.

They're never in one place for more than a few seconds, moving about my body like he can't get enough. I kiss him harder, one hand buried in his hair, the other dragging down the curve of his waist to pull him flush against me. Heat builds in every corner of my body, fast and wild and unrelenting.

I hear a rip behind me, then cool air hits my back. Yulian just ripped my shirt off. Or, well, he ripped his own shirt off of me. I chuckle into his mouth.

"Impatient, hm?" I murmur.

I sit up a bit, allowing the tatters of the shirt to fall off me before I chuck it to the other side of the room. Yulian watches in glee, looking proud of his work. Then, I watch his hands go to the shirt he's wearing.

It's my shirt, actually. I had offered to give his back before we drove here, but he insisted I keep it on. Pretty sure he just liked seeing me in his clothes, the possessive bastard. I suppose I can't say much though, since, as a result, he put my shirt on. It was much too small on him, so it clung tightly to his stomach and torso, tight enough that I can practically see his abs through the material.

It was one of the hottest things I've ever fucking seen.

"Do *not* rip that off yourself," I grow, "it's Gucci."

He laughs, deep and low, before moving his hands to instead pull the shirt over his head, throwing it across the room somewhere.

Then he pulls me back down on top of him, his tongue swiping across my bottom lip, daring me. I accept the challenge, deepening the kiss until we're tangled, breathless, hungry. My head spins. I feel drunk on him.

"Where's the lube?" I mutter against his lips, already anticipating the feel of him under me, around me, with me.

He stills for half a second. Then, with the most sheepish expression I've ever seen on that maddeningly smug face, he says, "...in the car."

I blink. “You wouldn’t shut up about round two, drag me into this bed, yet you left the lube in the car?”

He flashes an unapologetic smile, shrugging with a hint of mischief. “I was distracted. You were distracting.”

Rolling my eyes, I say “good answer.”

I flop back against the mattress, groaning. “Give me the keys.”

Yulian tosses them with a grin, and I catch them mid-air, flipping him off as I head for the door. “You’re lucky you’re pretty,” I call over my shoulder.

“Deadly pretty,” he purrs, stretching out across the bed like he’s modeling for a sin-soaked magazine cover. “Now hurry up or I’ll start without you.”

The cold hits me the moment I step outside, air crisp against my flushed skin. It’s only a short sprint to the car parked under the canopy of trees, but the sharp contrast from the heat of the cottage makes me shiver. I yank open the passenger door and rifle through the glove compartment until my hand closes around the small bottle. Got it.

When I jog back to the house, I’m grinning despite myself. Everything feels like a fever dream I don’t want to wake from.

I push the door open and step inside, and freeze.

He's sprawled across the bed, lying on his back, one hand tucked under his head and the other draped lazily across the sheets. The glow from the moonlight casts soft silver across his skin, catching on the messy strands of hair that fall across his brow. His lips are kiss-swollen. His collarbone is bruised from where I bit him earlier.

And best of all? He's completely naked.

His cock, half-hard, rests against his stomach and my mouth practically waters at the sight of him.

He catches me staring and lifts his head slightly. "Like what you see?" he asks, voice low and warm and a little amused.

I say nothing in reply, but I slowly reach down to pull my trousers and underwear off. They go down my legs slowly, as if I'm intentionally trying to tease him. Yulian's eyes track my every movement, dark and full, as they trail all over my body.

Finally, I step out of my last bit of clothing so that I, too am totally naked.

Yulian smirks, lifting an arm toward me. "Well come here then."

I don't hesitate to listen, striding toward the bed and crawling on and up it, spreading his legs further as I go until I'm settled in between them. My hands trace his calves, feeling the thick muscle underneath them.

I lean down, pressing kisses in the places my hands touched, getting higher and higher until I reach his cock.

Licking a long stripe from balls to head, I take him deep into my throat, all in one fluid motion.

"Ugh..." Yulian moans, shocked by the suddenness. His back arches and one of his hands grips my hair tight, the other twisting in the sheets.

Not letting his dick leave my mouth, I start pouring some of the lube onto my fingers. It's a bit of an awkward angle, but I manage. I let my slick finger trace over his hole a few times, feeling it quiver in anticipation.

My head bobs a few more times before I insert the first digit down to the knuckle. Yulian's moans come out breathy and long.

"Fuck, Mishka. Please," he begs.

His body feels absolutely divine beneath me, shining in the moonlight and goosebumps covering his skin.

As I focus on fingering him, my movements on his cock weaken until he decides to take matters into his own hands, and begins thrusting up into my mouth, I match the thrusts of my finger in time with his, until I hear consistent, rhythmic grunts spewing from his mouth.

"Oh fuck, baby," he moans, "you're so fucking good. So fucking hot."

I hum around his cock, the vibrations of it making Yulian even louder.

I pull for just a moment and I hear Yulian's voice break mid-moan. My own cock is thick and hard between the bed and my stomach as I grind it downwards, giving myself some relief. I pour more lube onto my fingers and slide two in this time, not giving him a moment to adjust.

My mouth goes back to sliding up and down him with more vigour as his thighs shake around my head.

"M-more," Yulian stutters. I comply, sliding a third finger in alongside the first two, opening him up for me. I move my fingers around inside him, searching.

I realise I've hit my mark when Yulian suddenly shouts, coming down my throat. His thighs shake strongly and his chest heaves as I choke a little. I don't think either of us were expecting that.

My mouth slides off his cock, cum dripping down my chin.

"What the fuck was that?" Yulian heaves.

I smirk at him. "Your prostate."

I remember him hitting mine while he was inside me and felt like I needed to give him the same experience. Clearly, he enjoyed it as much as I did.

"Jesus Christ," he whispers, breathless.

“I hope that’s not you finished, Yulian,” I tell him as he looks down at me, “because I was told I could fuck you, and I have no intention of changing my mind.”

Rather than giving him a chance to respond, I simply thrust three of my fingers back inside him at once, as he yells and writhes on the bed. His cock, which had turned soft from the orgasm, twitches. I debate taking it back into my mouth too, but I figure that might be a bit too much.

My wrist moves back and forth without slowing down. He’s a mess; groaning, moaning, grunting and begging. I kiss around his thighs, watching as his cock slowly begins to harden again.

“Come on, baby, get hard again for me. I want at least one more orgasm out of you tonight. Preferably while I’m balls deep inside you.”

Deciding he’s ready, I pull out from him and push up onto my knees. Crawling up the bed, I grab a few pillows, putting them under his head. Then, I take my place straddling his chest and hold my cock in front of his mouth.

“Well?” I ask, “what are you waiting for? Get my cock ready for you.”

Yulian looks up at me with glazed eyes, but a devious grin overcomes his face.

Then he moves his head and takes my cock in one go. I’m so surprised by it that I almost fall forward, instead I manage to grab the headboard in front of me, holding myself up. Yulian doesn’t go slow or gentle. His head moves rapidly, spit running down his chin and

gurgling sounds echoing around the room.

I'm shocked he's able to breath, but then again, maybe he can't, and he just doesn't care. His mouth hollows around me, so tight around my dick. My head rolls back and my eyes close as I focus on not coming too soon.

Finally, using all the self-control I have, just as I'm about to finish, I pull his head off of me and collapse backward so I'm just sat on his hips. Yulian breathes in big gulps of air, but he grins at me. Drool trickles from his mouth, but when I look down at myself, I see my cock more than adequately coated in his spit.

"You ready baby?" I ask, moving into position.

"Ready?" he says, "Mishka, I've been ready for *years*."

I pull the pillows from behind him and instead put them under his hips so I can get a better angle. I see his cock has returned to full hardness, just from blowing me, which I let out a shaky breath at.

Then I line my cock up with his hole, and push inside in one, long, deep thrust.

Yulian's hips immediately arch, but I hold them down. I don't know how long it's been since he last did this, but I'm hoping a while, and so I give him time to adjust.

His chest rises and falls quickly as he throws an arm over his eyes. I reach up and grab it, pulling it away.

“Don’t cover any part of yourself, Yulian, I want to look you in the eyes while you take my cock over and over again.”

“Fuck,” Yulian groans and I interpret this as he’s ready.

I pull out before pushing back in again. I do it a few times, starting slow before getting faster and deeper with each thrust. Yulian’s moans seem to match me as he stares directly up at my face.

Finally, I settle into a fast, unrelenting pace, fucking him again and again. The sounds of our skin slapping together echo around the room.

I might have fucked a girl before, but it was nothing like this. Nothing has ever felt like this, not like it does with Yulian. It’s like I’m fucking someone for the first time again. All I can think about is his tight walls hugging my cock, pulling me in over and over. It’s tight and hot and perfect.

I think about how this must have been what he felt just a few hours ago when he was inside me. I groan thinking about the pleasure I must have brought him.

“Who-“ I stutter as I thrust even harder. “Who do you belong to?” I grunt.

“*You*. Fucking you, Mishka. I belong to you,” Yulian yells back.

“Damn fucking right, you’re mine. From now until forever, you are mine. Anyone that’s come before, any man or woman that has had

you, they mean absolutely nothing. I'll kill anyone who thinks differently."

Yulian nods his head but can't seem to find the words to speak as my powerful hips appear to fuck the words right out him.

He gasps a few times, like he's trying to force the sounds out. "And- and you- and you're mine," he finally stutters, taking a deep breath as he's done.

My cock pounds into him even harder, but I can't seem to find the spot I need. Getting fed up, I pull out.

"What are you-" Yulian's cut off as I flip him over onto his stomach. His arms go out to balance himself when I pull his hips up until his ass is in the air in front of me and his face is buried in the sheets. Then, I push back inside him.

Any attempt to push his front half up goes out the window as he collapses again, just moaning into the sheets as I take him hard and fast. Then, he practically screams as I angle my hips perfectly, *finally*, and start hitting his prostate over and over.

But, I don't like this. I want to hear his sounds properly. I want to hear him shouting my name loud and clear, not into the sheets.

So, I lean over and grab both his wrists and wrench them behind his back, forcing him to lift his chest off the bed and put all his weight on his knees. I push his wrists together and hold them in place, at his lower back, with one hand.

The other grips his hip with a tight force, hard enough to bruise.

For a moment, the idea of what he might look like with my chains wrapped around his wrists instead of my hand crosses my mind.

I don't hold back in the slightest now, pounding into him with all the strength I have. My hips slap against his ass with so much force I hear the bed shake, and I worry it could break.

Finally, I feel myself get close. But I want to see him cum with my cock deep inside him first. So, I take the hand holding his hip and reach around his body to instead wrap it around his cock.

He whimpers at the feeling, but I don't hesitate to start stroking him roughly, in time with my thrusts.

"So fucking close, baby," I whisper, "need to see you cum on my cock first, though. Do it for me, Yulian. Fucking come for me. Show me how good I make you feel."

He moans, the loudest I've heard him yet, and I feel as his whole-body tenses, before my hand recognises the feeling of being painted with spurting cum.

"Vaughn!" he shouts as he finishes, his body descending into trembles.

Feeling him come undone around me pushes me over the edge too, I groan, deep and low as I push as far into him as I can before coming. My hips do a few lazy thrusts to keep it going, before I finally pull out, watching my cum drip from his hole, and fall exhaustingly onto the bed beside him, where he still rests on his stomach.

The absence of our voices fills the room for a minute or two, only the sounds of our heavy breathing and rapid panting taking its place. Then, with shaky hands, I push myself up and stumble to the bathroom, quickly grabbing a flannel and running it under warm water.

When I walk back into the room, Yulian has rolled onto his back again. I climb between his legs, wiping gently at his hole. Then I lean up and press a deep kiss to his mouth, and I feel him smile into it.

“Fuck, Mishka,” Yulian’s voice cracks as he speaks, “we are so doing that again.”

I chuckle and lie down beside him. I grab the blanket that we had pushed down and half-off the bed and pull it over the both of us. Then I turn my head and rest it on Yulian’s shoulder.

“That good, huh?” I joke, though my ego certainly does enjoy the praise.

“So good,” Yulian replies.

“The best you’ve ever had? No other guy able to fuck you as good as me?” Jealousy twinges inside of me at the idea of him having sex with anyone else, but it might improve just a little if I knew I was the best of them all.

Yulian chuckles. “Mishka, no other guy has fucked me full stop.”

My heart freezes in my chest.

"What?" I say, "so you've never bottomed before me?"

Yulian laughs again. "No, Vaughn, I've never slept with a *man* before you."

"What?" I say again, "but-but you've slept with girls?"

"Yeah, I have. Though not as many as people seem to think. They were more for the image than anything."

I gape at him. "So-so what, exactly? Am I the only guy you're attracted to? Do you usually prefer girls?"

He grins at me. "Quite the opposite, actually. I don't really like girls at all, being with them was just a physical release and something to make sure I appeared 'normal' to my father. I've only ever been interested in guys, even before I met you."

I nod.

"But I've never considered ever sleeping with one. I always wanted to reserve that for you. You might not have realised what we are yet, but I did. I knew it would happen one day, even if I had to wait. And now look. We've both lost our top *and* bottom virginity in the same night!"

I laugh at him, and a possessive feeling settles in my chest at the knowledge that I'm the only man whose ever had him, and he's the

only one whose ever had me.

I lean my head up and press a kiss to his jaw. When he feels it, he angles his own head down so I can press one against his lips too. “Well, I’m happy we were both each other’s first, at least with a guy.”

Yulian huffs. “You say that like you had a choice. I might have allowed you to be with a woman, but if you had ever let a man anywhere near you, I’d have killed him immediately.”

Lightly hitting his chest, I roll my eyes. “Well, I suppose it’s a good thing you didn’t sleep with any men either. Or else I might be tracking them down to do the same.”

“Ah ha! See, we’re both on the same page. This is that communicating you were talking about.”

Well, I don’t know if threatening mutual murder against anyone that touches the other quite counts, but I’ll take it.

“Also,” adds Yulian, “my point still stands. Anyone that has even the slightest interest in you that tries to steal your attention will be put down immediately. I mean it.”

Oh, I don’t doubt that.

I press another kiss to his mouth. “Right back at you.”

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Yulian

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It’s been a week. One week since Vaughn finally gave in. One week since he clawed into me like he couldn’t stand the thought of not touching me anymore. One week since we cracked ourselves open like overripe fruit, soft and vulnerable and messy and mine.

I still don’t quite believe it. That he’s letting me have this, him, without restraint. That we’re doing this for real, even if no one else can know. We agreed to keep it quiet. For now. Fine. That’s fine. I can be patient. I’ve waited this long; what’s a little more time?

And in the meantime, I get him every day.

Every. Fucking. Day.

We’ve been fucking nonstop. Like animals. Like addicts. We barely make it through the front door of the cottage, or into my car, or into the woods, or anywhere else on this island we think we can get away with, before we’re pressed together, panting against each other’s mouths. It's like every breath he takes without me hurts, and that’s exactly how it should be.

I’m giddy. Euphoric. High on him. My phone vibrates constantly with his texts, even just dumb little things like a picture of something that made him think of me, a blurry photo of his coffee cup, a text asking me what I’m up to. He’s surprisingly good at being sappy, and I eat it up like it’s oxygen.

I did ask once why he finds it so easy, and he said since he had been in a long-term relationship, being a loving partner was something he’s

familiar with. That did piss me off and made me particularly wish I could kill Camilla. But then I realised I already did and was a bit disappointed I couldn't do it again. But oh well, he's mine now.

We're back to talking 24/7, and that's all that matters.

Things are perfect.

Except-

"YULIAN!"

My jaw tightens so fast it clicks. My spine stiffens. I panic, quickly glancing around the room for somewhere to hide, but I'm a big guy. So, I make what probably isn't the smartest decision, and grab a newspaper on the table, sit down, and hold it open in front of my face as if I'm reading it.

I hear footsteps storm into the room and tighten my grip on the newspaper. However, rather than falling for my cartoonish trick and failing to see me past my cover, I hear the footsteps get closer and closer until I see two sneaker-clad feet on the floor, standing before me.

Cringing, I slowly pull the newspaper out the way until I see my sister stood in front of me, arms crossed and looking furious. I smile sheepishly at her.

"Hey Tati," I grin, "how's it going?"

“Don’t ‘hey Tati’ me, Yulian,” she snaps, “where have you been the last week? I know you’re avoiding me, don’t lie.”

Because, of course, the only thing that isn’t perfect right now is my wonderful sister. Or, more specifically, my refusal to talk to my sister. Or, even more specifically, my refusal to tell her what happened after I ran off to talk to Vaughn a week ago. I know the moment she gets me alone she’ll start questioning me, so I’ve been doing everything in my power to stay away from her.

It’s not that I don’t want to tell her. Hell, I hate the idea of lying to her. But that’s the thing, I *can’t* lie to her. Small things here and there, sure, or simply concealing the truth, yeah. But straight up lying about what happened? If I tried to say to her face that there was nothing going on between Vaughn and I now? She’d see right through me.

And *obviously* I’d like to brag for hours about how I finally managed to rein in my Mishka, but I can’t, because we agreed to secrecy.

When I hesitate to answer my sister, she continues, “you can’t ignore me forever, you know.”

I dramatically flop back on the sofa and throw my arm over my face like a silent movie actress. “I was aiming for forever, actually. Shame it didn’t pan out.”

“Yulian.”

“Tati.”

“Don’t.”

“I’m literally not doing anything right now,” I snap, pulling my arm away to glare at her. “Can’t you go pester, I don’t know, someone else? That girl we met that you’re obsessed with?”

She rolls her eyes. “Trust me, I’d much rather be hanging out with Jess right now. But unfortunately, my idiot brother is being, shockingly, an *idiot*.”

Her newfound friendship with Jess is probably the only reason I’ve managed to escape her this long, since the two of them are practically joint at the hip twenty-four seven nowadays.

“*You’re* the idiot.”

“Oh yeah, real mature.”

“Thank you.”

“Yulian!”

I chuckle. “Okay, okay. Fine, I admit I might have been avoiding you just a little. I just needed a little alone time. You know me, never one to enjoy attention.”

She doesn’t laugh. Which sucks. I’m hilarious.

She just stares.

The kind of stare that cuts straight through the layers I've built up, the smirks, the flippancy, the psychotic little smokescreens I throw around to keep people off balance. But Tati? She sees right through me. Always has.

I sit up slowly, sighing like it physically hurts me. "Fine. Jesus. Come in. Sit down. Drink my water. Judge my life choices."

"I've already done all of those," she mutters, sitting down anyway. "Now I just want to know what happened."

I give her my best wide-eyed innocent expression. "Define 'what.'"

She narrows her eyes. "Don't play dumb."

"Never," I say sweetly. "It's not a role I was born to play."

"You disappeared after that night. You've barely been at the house, but when you have you've been smiling like a lunatic at your phone, dodging me at every turn, and the only person who could possibly be on the other end of that phone-"

"-is my therapist, obviously. I've been thinking about working on my daddy issues."

She ignores me. "-is Vaughn. So, talk."

I drum my fingers against my knee. I consider throwing myself out the window just to get out of this conversation. I consider lying. I consider telling her everything.

The problem is, I want to. I want to spill it. I want to tell someone that I've finally got him. That he kissed me like he meant it. That he wants me, not out of anger or history or guilt, but because he can't help it anymore. That we've been wrapped around each other like ivy every night since and I've never felt this feral or this full.

But I promised him. And no matter how deranged and possessive and unhinged I am, and I am very, I'm not going to break the first real promise I've made to him in years.

So, I force a grin. "We talked. That's all."

She gives me the flattest, driest look ever produced in human history. "Yulian…" she sighs. "I already know, remember. I know the truth about what happened that night with the basement, I know that there's something going on between you two and I know it's definitely not something that dad would approve of."

My sister leans toward me, looking me in the eye. "But I won't tell. Anyone. You know I support you no matter what. Hell, I'm pretty sure I already know what's going on, I just need you to admit it to me."

My jaw clenches as an internal debate takes place within me. Finally, I nod. "We talked, a lot. But I think we're in a pretty good place now. And we're figuring out our relationship is, too. Like, non-platonically."

A bright smile spreads across Tati's face. "I'm so happy for you, Yulian."

I smile back. “Thanks. But you can’t tell anyone, I mean it. Not even your new BFF. And I’m going to tell Vaughn that you know.”

She pulls a face at me. “*Obviously* you have to tell him I know. I need to meet him and make sure he’s good enough for my brother.”

I roll my eyes at her. Vaughn is the only person good enough for me. No one else comes close to being worth my greatness.

Taking a deep breath, I murmur, “there is something else.”

Tati furrows her brows. “What is it?”

“I know it doesn’t really matter, but…” I sigh, “I’m gay. I just thought you should know. All the girls, they were just me trying to fit in and convince dad of something that wasn’t true.”

My sister moves over to me and wraps me in a hug. “If it’s important enough to you that you felt the need to tell me, then it *does* matter, Yules,” she whispers in my ear.

“Thank you,” I say back.

We pull back from one another and Tati claps me on the back. “Now, go see your man, I can just tell your getting angsty already after being away from him for a few hours.”

“Brat,” I tell her, though I do stand up to leave as she’s right. I’m angsty as fuck. It practically feels like I’m having withdrawals. It’s definitely time for a trip to the cottage.

Telling her goodbye, I head for the door, only to hear her call after me.

“Don’t forget to tell him that I know! And I expect a meeting between us promptly. I will be bringing knives. It’s up to you if you want to tell him that. Depends how prepared you want him.”

I don’t look back, just simply raise my middle finger.

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I throw the cottage door open with a dramatic flourish and call out, “Honey, I’m home!”

There’s a faint scoff from down the hallway, and I can perfectly picture Vaughn rolling his eyes, followed by his voice, lazy and warm: “Bedroom.”

I shut the door behind me and head straight down the hallway. The moment I push open the door, my chest tightens in that ridiculous, beautiful way it always does when I look at him.

He’s stretched across the bed, still in his jeans and hoodie, legs crossed at the ankles, one arm folded behind his head while the other thumbs through his phone. The afternoon light slants through the window, cutting golden lines across his torso. His brows are furrowed slightly at whatever he’s reading, lips parted just a bit, breathing easy. He

doesn't even look up, just hums low in his throat, greeting me.

I cross the room in a few steps and launch myself onto the bed without warning, climbing on top of him like a wild animal, wrapping my arms around his chest and letting my head drop against his shoulder.

"Miss me?" I murmur into his throat, nipping lightly just beneath his jaw.

He chuckles, the phone still in his hand, not even flinching at the sudden weight of me pressed into him. Then he raises an eyebrow and looks me up and down, and the way I'm entirely draped over him. "Looks like you're the one who missed me."

"Damn right I did," I mutter, tightening my grip like he might disappear if I let go.

He finally sets the phone down on the pillow beside him and looks at me, those unreadable eyes blinking slow and soft. "You're clingy today."

"I'm clingy *every* day," I correct with a smirk. "And you love it."

"Mm," he hums noncommittally, but I can see the fondness in his face, and worse, the *peace.* He's too calm. Too relaxed. I need to rattle him a little.

"Who were you texting?" I ask, deliberately casual, but we both know there's nothing casual about my possessiveness. I want to know who has the right to believe that they are allowed to take even a second of

my Mishka's attention, attention that belongs to me.

Vaughn raises an eyebrow. "My dad. Just business stuff."

Ugh. "Boring," I comment, flopping onto my back dramatically.

He flicks my ear. "It might well be, but I have no doubt you do plenty of this sort of stuff yourself."

I pull a face. "Damn right. And I'm awesome at it too."

He rolls his eyes, but when his phone buzzes again next to us, he picks it up and goes back to texting. Grinning, I begin slowly kissing the top of his jaw, before making my way down to his neck. I see his fingers shake and hesitate where they're trying to type.

"Yulian…" he groans quietly as I pull his hoodie as far down as it'll go so I can move onto his collarbone. One of the hands that had been holding his phone slides into my hair and his eyes go shut.

However, the moment is ruined yet again when his phone buzzes twice in his hand. His eyes snap open and he uses the grip on my hair to lightly pull me away, his attention going back to his phone.

I grit my teeth, frustrated about losing his focus.

"This is important," he says absentmindedly, sensing my annoyance, "you know that."

He's right, I do, but that doesn't make me feel better.

"Does your dad talk to you a lot about business?" I question. I'm lucky to speak to my own father even once every two weeks.

"Yeah, every day," he answers with a shrug, "especially now that I'm stepping into more leadership stuff here in the UK. He likes to keep me in the loop. Wants to make sure I'm ready for anything."

Of course he does. Could Vaughn's parents be anymore fucking perfect? I don't think he's ever said a bad word about them, even once.

"Do you feel ready?" I ask, more curious than anything. Vaughn and I are probably the only people in the world who can understand each other in this sense, the pressure of being heirs to such an important organization.

As for myself, I can't wait for the day I finally get to rule my empire like I know I deserve. I'll rule it with an iron fist, sure. But I won't be my father. I'll be nothing like him. But he's all I've ever known, the only role model I've seen when it comes to ruling a mafia empire and sometimes, I wonder how I'll fair having to figure out the gaps I erase him from myself.

"Most days," he says slowly. "But… sometimes I wonder if they take me seriously. Not my parents, obviously."

Obviously.

“Or the other Heathens, for that matter. But I’m the youngest, and, well, I’m not my dad. Nowhere near. No matter how hard I’ve tried.”

I grin at him. “Well, I for one certainly don’t want you to be your dad. He’s not nearly as sexy as you.”

“Yulian!” Vaughn scolds. I chuckle, but he continues, “my dad is the greatest Pakhan the New York Bratva has ever seen. I don’t want to ruin his legacy, disappoint it, even. I already know that some of the older generation doubt my ability because… well, they just do, and what if I can never prove myself?”

I catch the hesitation, something he chose not to say, but I leave it alone for now. I can tell he chose not to say it for a reason.

I prop my chin on his chest and look at him, letting the silence stretch between us.

It’s different for me.

That doubt? It doesn’t come from my men. They’d follow me into hell without asking why. My father made sure of that. They see me as the bloodline, the next in line, the heir-apparent, and they know exactly what’s expected of them if they want to keep breathing.

No. The doubt? That voice? It's not mine. It’s his. *His* voice, buried in my skull like a tick, whispering every time I hesitate. Every time I flinch. Every time I feel something I shouldn't. And not for the first time, I wonder what I might have turned out like if I had been raised by someone like Kirill Morozov instead.

“It doesn’t matter what anyone thinks,” I tell Vaughn, “there is no need to ‘prove yourself’, you are the heir. You are the Pakhans son, and you will be their leader. And anyone who isn’t ready to support that should be prepared for a bullet to the skull.”

Vaughn smiles. “Thanks,” he says, leaning over to give me a kiss. “I suppose you think much too highly of yourself to ever have similar thoughts,” he jokes.

“Well, I certainly don’t doubt my fathers’ men when it comes to whether they’ll support me. They believe in blood rights and so unquestioningly uphold me as heir.”

Vaughn nods his head.

“But… that doesn’t mean I know exactly what I’m doing, especially considering the role model I had.”

I feel Vaughn freeze beneath me. I’m not sure whether it’s the shock of hearing me admit to weakness, or the mention of my father, who we have been avoiding discussing over the last week.

“Role model?” Vaughn asks quietly.

I sigh. “For… obvious reasons, I want to be different to my father. But I have never known a different leadership style than the one he taught me. What if I end up just like him?”

Vaughn wraps one of his hands around one of mine. “Yulian… you already are different to him. So different. And besides, so what if you don’t know exactly what you’re doing all the time? I can already tell

how great you'll be just from how badly you want it. And, if anything, we can just learn together."

He shrugs a shoulder, and I squeeze his hand.

But, even despite his words, I still consider, deep in my mind, how different things might have ended up if the escape had worked that night. And if I had successfully gotten Tati and myself out just a few days later. Growing up with Vaughn, being raised by his parents.

Anyway, things are getting a bit tense, so I figure we should move on from this talk. Besides, with Vaughn being so sweet right now, I think it's the best time to drop the my-sister-knows bomb.

I crawl over him, placing my hands on either side of his head. He grins up at me, looking me up and down. I lean down, placing a kiss to his jaw. "Hey, Mishka?"

"Mhm?"

"I know you said we were keeping this a secret, but my sister was actually the one who helped me figure everything out in the first place and so she kind of knows everything, including that we're seeing each other now, but in my defence, she figured it out, I didn't tell her, so it wasn't actually my fault. But don't worry, she won't tell anyone and is totally supportive. Anyway, she says she wants to meet you- maybe wear a bulletproof vest -so when do you think you'll be free?"

I feel him completely frozen beneath me for a few moments, just staring up at me, then:

"*What?*"

Oops, okay, I probably could have been a little gentler with that.

-

I push open the front door to the mansion, stepping into cool marble silence. It's late. Vaughn and I had considered staying the night, but we've been doing that a little too much lately, so we figured it was best to go to our respective homes for the night.

However, I barely make it through the front door when a voice calls out to me.

"Yulian," Mikhail says, voice low but direct. He emerges from the shadow of the hallway like he's been waiting.

I blink, caught off guard. "What are you doing up?"

His mouth twitches like he wants to smile but doesn't. "Haven't seen you around much."

"I've been busy," I say, brushing past him toward the staircase. "Good old dad caught on to the lack of classes I attended last semester, so I've been trying to make them up, you know?"

Bullshit. Nothing could make me attend class. It was bad enough when Kayden was my professor, now it's just some simpering fool who actually cares about making the world a better place through teaching

future generations of lawyers. How does that even make sense?

Mikhail follows, hands in his pockets. “Mm. Right. Uni.” His tone is casual, but I know him too well to miss the thread of challenge beneath it. “Problem is, I know that’s not true.”

I freeze on the first step, hand on the polished wood rail. Slowly, I turn to look at him.

He sighs. “You know I only use it if I’m worried.”

A beat of silence. I already know what he’s talking about, but I don’t want to acknowledge it. He goes on anyway.

“You’ve got that tracker on your phone, remember? The one only I can access in case of emergencies. Your father insisted on it.” His voice is steady, but quieter now. “I gave it a glance a few days ago, after you failed to come home for two days straight. You’ve been spending a lot of time in the middle of the woods.”

I clench my jaw, heart thudding once in my chest. Vaughn’s face flashes in my mind tired and smirking, the curve of his mouth, the softness in his eyes when he’s too exhausted to keep his guard up. We already agreed not to tell anyone, and I’ve already failed that once in telling Tati, even if that wasn’t entirely my own fault.

I shift on the stair, debating.

Mikhail is…everything he’s always been. Loyal. Steady. I trust him more than anyone besides my sister. He’s been with me through every single disaster I’ve set off in my life and still hasn’t walked away.

I almost tell him. Almost.

But then I remember the conversation Vaughn and I had just a few hours ago after I explained fully about my sister knowing. How he listened closely and when I was done, he just told me that it was okay, that he wasn't mad, that he understood. And then he said he would be glad to meet the girl I've always spoken so highly of.

I truly believe that even if I told Mikhail now, Vaughn would still accept it, would understand it. But I don't want him to have to understand again. I just want to keep my promise to him.

"I go there to think," I say finally, voice even. "It's quiet. That's all."

Mikhail doesn't look away. "You've never been a 'quiet reflection in the woods' type, Yul."

"Well," I say, smiling thinly. "Maybe I'm evolving. You always complain how unpredictable I am."

He shakes his head, not laughing. "If you don't want to tell me, fine. But I'm not stupid."

"I never said you were."

"I'm your head guard," he says softly. "And your best friend. You can tell me anything. I want you to tell me things. Even if we both know I won't understand it or like it, I want to know you can still talk to me."

I swallow thickly, something burning in the back of my throat. He means it. Of course he does. And it makes it harder.

"I know," I say, keeping my tone light. "But there's nothing to tell."

A flicker of something, disappointment, maybe, crosses his face. But he doesn't push again. He just nods once and lets it drop. I won't turn off the tracker. Mikhail is the only one with access to it. My father may have suggested it, but my terms for agreement was that only Mikhail could see it and I do believe it's necessary. I trust him, and I want to tell him, but I can't, not yet at least.

I turn and keep walking up the stairs. My footsteps echo hollow on the marble.

Behind me, Mikhail stays rooted at the base, unmoving.

-

Vaughn

-

The soft knock on my door comes just as I'm finishing the last page of a report I've been avoiding for three days. I already know who it is before I say, "come in."

Gareth slips in like a shadow, quiet, amused, too at home in places he shouldn't be. His hair's damp, probably from a shower, and he's wearing one of those ridiculous T-shirts. This one says *'God's Favourite Menace'*. He drops onto my bed, sprawling himself out on it without

waiting for an invitation, resting his hands behind his head and crossing his legs at the ankle like he owns the place.

"You been hiding," he says. "I assume it's not because of the paperwork."

I give him a look. "It might be."

He snorts, tilting his head. "Any news about you and our favourite Russian prince?"

I choke a little, not expecting him to be so direct. Though, I probably shouldn't expect any less from G.

"Because last I heard, you two were practically at war with one another. Then, all of a sudden, it all stops, and I barely see you anymore. And when I *do* see you, you're practically glowing like you've been plugged into an outlet."

I hesitate, a flicker of uncertainty running through me. We agreed not to tell anyone, but then again, *Yulian* told Tati. And he said I could tell someone too, if I wanted. Gareth already knows most of the mess anyway. If there's anyone, I'd trust with this, anyone who I feel like I could go to for advice, it's him.

So, I shut the laptop and spin in my chair to face him properly back.

"We're seeing each other."

Gareth raises a brow, curious but not shocked. “Since when?”

I go into a long explanation about how we discovered the truth about the basement, not that Gareth knew much about what I thought happened originally anyway. The most the Heathens ever really knew was that I was kidnapped by Yulian’s father and held in their basement, and I didn’t have a very good time down there.

Gareth’s jaw actually drops a few times as I go into details he has never heard about the things I had thought happened down there, especially on the night I tried to escape, as well as when I then explain what actually happened, as I’ve recently learned.

“Jesus,” Gareth mutters, voice lower now. “And… you definitely believe him?”

I won’t tell Gareth the actual reason I finally believed. Even just thinking about that snake tattoo makes rage boil inside me. My eyes get stuck on it every time we take our clothes off still, no matter how hard Yulian tries to distract me from it.

“I do.” It’s not even hard to say anymore. “He didn’t know.”

Gareth exhales slowly, folding his arms. “Damn. That’s… insane. Like, I knew it was a mess, but not *that* level of mess.”

“Yeah,” I say, glancing away. “Same.”

A beat of silence, then Gareth grins, all teeth. “So… did you fuck yet?”

I groan. “Jesus, Gareth.”

“That’s not a no.”

I sigh, trying not to let the smile tug at my mouth. “Yes.”

He beams, clapping once like I just won an award. “I knew it! That man is way too obsessed with you not to get his hands down your pants at the first opportunity. Okay, important question. Did you top or bottom?”

“Well, I bottomed.”

Gareth cheers, loud and obnoxious. “*Finally*! Welcome to the superior team. Honestly, I’m not even surprised, Yulian certainly does look the type to-”

“And then I topped.”

That shuts him up mid-cheer. He freezes, finger still in the air like he’s about to toast something. “...You what.”

I shrug, smug now. “You heard me.”

He slumps dramatically in the chair. “You betrayed us.”

“I didn’t realise I joined a team.”

“Well, you *had*. You were doing *so well*,” he says, mournful now. “And then you went and *topped*.”

“I *also* bottomed.”

“Yeah, yeah, you’re a fucking *switch*. Greedy bastard.”

That makes me laugh. “You’re just mad I don’t belong solely to your camp.”

“I *am* mad. We could have rubbed it in Niko’s face so hard. Let’s see him make fun of me for bottoming when his future Pakhan-“

I give him a look.

“-well, obviously when you’re ready to tell him.”

I sigh.

Gareth smirks. “Anyway, at least we’re the full set now.”

“Full set?” I question.

“Yeah. Bottom, top, switch. Me, Niko and you. We could be a sticker pack.”

I roll my eyes. “That’s deranged.”

He grins wider. “Thanks. I try.”

There’s a brief pause. His smile fades just a bit, enough for something real to slip through. “But seriously. You’re okay? You trust him?”

“I do.”

“And you’re not going to snap and gut him in the middle of the night?”

I look at him. “…Not unless I find out he is lying about something. But I really do believe him.”

Gareth hums. “Fair enough.”

I give him a long look. “You’re not to tell anyone. Not even Kayden.”

He gives me a faux-offended gasp. “Please. I trusted *you* with me and Kayden. You know you can always trust me with the same.” He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “But seriously, you can trust me, Vaughn. Swear on whatever you want. I won’t say a word.”

I nod, the knot in my chest loosening a little. “Thanks.”

He shrugs, already spinning the chair again. “What are best friends for, if not to cheer your sex life and threaten your enemies?”

“Well, in your case, they were the same thing.”

“Exactly. Efficient.”

He stands, stretching, then pauses in the doorway. “For what it’s worth, I think you and Yulian make sense. In a weird, kind of terrifying, ‘you might accidentally snap and kill each other one day’ kind of way.”

I smirk. “High praise.”

“I know. Don’t get used to it.”

And then he’s gone, the door clicking shut behind him, and for once, the silence doesn’t feel heavy. It feels understood.

-

I’m halfway through some half-decent small talk with Jessie when I spot them. I’ve just finished class and happened to run into her while leaving campus. It’s been a while since I last caught up with her, so we’ve fallen into step as we chat.

One second, she’s teasing me about something I don’t even register, and the next, the world goes silent, like a switch thrown in my skull. A static buzz builds in my ears, thick and sharp, dulling every sound but

the sudden thud of my heart.

Yulian.

He's sitting at one of the stone benches outside the campus café. The sun flickers between the trees and catches in his hair. His posture is relaxed, that soft, almost reluctant smile he wears when he's trying to be polite curving at the edges of his mouth. And Annie is sitting across from him. Laughing.

It hits me like a freight train.

I stop walking. So does Jessie. We both freeze at the exact same moment as our eyes track on Yulian.

My stomach flips, acid rising with the weight of something sour and immediate. My fists curl before I even realize I've clenched them, nails biting into the meat of my palms.

He's smiling at her.

He's sitting with her.

They're just talking.

They're just talking, they're just talking, they're just-

Jessie mutters something. Her voice sounds distant and warped, like

it's underwater. I can barely make it out.

"I-uh-I should go. I just remembered-I have to-uh-go."

She scurries off before I can say a word. I think I nod. I might not have moved at all.

I don't even *look* at her. Because I'm locked-*glued*-to Yulian.

It's irrational. I know that.

I *know* it.

I know it, I know it, I know it, I know it.

I know Annie is his friend. I know nothing is happening. I know they're not touching. I know he's not interested in her or she in him-

But my brain doesn't care. The knowledge doesn't matter.

It never fucking matters.

My throat is tight, so tight I can't breathe. My skin feels too small for my body, like I'm going to rip right out of it. My pulse pounds at my temples, behind my eyes, a war drum that makes it impossible to think. I'm shaking, hands trembling, jaw locked. It's like fire in my chest, behind my ribs, crawling up my spine and clawing its way out through every nerve ending.

I want to scream.

I want to smash something.

I want to walk over and grab him by the collar and *demand* to know what the fuck he thinks he's doing, why he didn't tell me he was seeing her, why he's *laughing* like he hasn't spent everyday with me, in my bed, for over a week-

But I don't.

Because I see his eyes flick up. And he sees me.

His smile drops instantly. His head whips around like he's trying to check if anyone is watching. There's panic in his face, guilt- no, fear. We're not supposed to be seen together. He told me that. We agreed.

It only makes it worse.

Because it makes it look like he *knows* he's doing something wrong.

And the fire spreads. Unchecked. Uncontrolled.

I doesn't matter how irrational I know it might be. I can't fucking control myself. I can't control my fucking emotions. My *rage*.

I can’t stay here. I can’t snap in public.

I turn so fast I almost stumble. My body moves on autopilot, weaving through students and sunlight and the echo of my own rapid, unstable breathing. I get to my bike and barely get my helmet on before I’m straddling it, kicking it into ignition, and tearing out of the parking lot like I’m being chased by something monstrous and bloodthirsty.

Which I am.

Me.

I’m being chased by *me*.

My mind is chaos. White-hot rage and images I can’t stop like Yulian brushing her hair behind her ear, leaning in to whisper something, her giggling and reaching out to touch his arm, and I know they aren’t real. I *know* they didn’t happen. But my brain doesn't care.

That’s the worst part.

It doesn’t matter if it’s real.

It matters that I *feel* it.

Every bone in my body is screaming with this helpless, irrational, volcanic fury. I want to destroy something. I want to burn the entire fucking world to the ground and then collapse on the ashes. My heart is pounding so fast it hurts, like it’s trying to punch its way out of my

chest.

The cottage. Just get to the fucking cottage.

I don't even remember the drive. All I know is that I'm there before I realize I left.

I yank the key from the ignition and practically throw it to the ground, stumbling as I slam the front door open, chest heaving. My helmet rolls across the floor, forgotten.

I fall to my knees in the centre of the living room and press my palms to my eyes, as hard as I can, like I can physically force the thoughts out of my head. My breathing's shallow, ragged, uncontrolled.

My skin is still crawling. My fists still want to punch walls. My heart won't slow down.

It wasn't real.

You trust him.

They're friends. They're friends. They're friends.

But the worst part is I can't *feel* any of that. Not yet. Not when I'm like this.

All I feel is the fire.

And I’m so fucking tired of burning.

Chapter End Notes

woo hope you enjoyed. i had some serious writers block while trying to write this lol, so im not fully happy with how it turned out but i hope you are!
the next chapter i dont think should take too long. its a pretty big one that ive been building up to since the start, with a key part of vaughns background/personality being revealed!
as always tysm for all the support <3

Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Notes

hii enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

I'm just passing through campus, headed toward the parking lot, when I hear someone call my name.

"Yulian!"

I turn and see Annie jogging toward me, her ponytail bouncing with each step. I stop walking and wait as she closes the distance, smiling. "Hey, stranger," she says, a little breathless. "Haven't seen you around in a while."

I offer a grin. "Yeah, been busy."

It's a half-truth. I spent a while having to avoid her to ensure Vaughn didn't slice her throat open while we were having our war. He was already on edge enough when it came to her and I couldn't risk it. By the time I thought he had moved past it, we had started seeing one another, and I was too busy to see anyone else.

Her eyes search my face like she's trying to read between the lines. "You free for lunch? I was just about to grab a table."

I hesitate. Not because of Annie, I like her well enough. She's sharp, capable, always good at her job. But… Vaughn. We haven't discussed her at all since he left that rather ominous message in my room. I still don't fully understand what happened that day when he saw us together and just walked away.

But, surely, by now, he must know I truly have no interest in her. And it doesn't take much to understand she also has no interest in me.

"Sure," I say, and follow her toward the outdoor café area. We find a table in the sun, the air is still pretty cold, but we are heading toward Spring now, and Annie pulls out a sandwich from a brown paper bag.

She doesn't waste time. "So, how've you really been?"

I raise an eyebrow. "And what's that supposed to mean?"

She rolls her eyes. "Boss, I've known you long enough to know when 'busy' means something else."

I chuckle quietly, shrugging one shoulder. "Still just busy."

Annie nods her head, but stares at me for a moment. "Well… if this 'busyness' has something to do with a certain member of the Heathens, specifically you getting quite cozy with him, then I want you to know you have my full support."

What the fuck? Am I really that obvious? How has literally everyone I'm close to figured us out?

She continues. “And I want to make it known now that I’d be happy to extend my services to anyone that you’d like me to. A friend of yours is a friend of mine. Well, maybe not friend in your case, but you know what I mean.”

Annie winks at me and I groan. So, she definitely knows. I can’t say I’m surprised though, she’s proven time and time again how perceptive she is, not to mention her first order of business was to put herself forward as someone who is happy to help with anything either of us needs. Annie certainly knows what she wants, and she has the confidence to show it.

Annie doesn’t say anything else, allowing me the time to choose how I’d like to respond rather than pushing in any direction. I’m not overly worried about the fact that she knows. She has demonstrated her ability to keep a secret on my behalf, though I do question how Vaughn might react. However, this could be the perfect opportunity to show him how little he has to worry about when it comes to her.

Let Vaughn see for himself that there’s no threat here, no hidden intentions. Annie’s harmless, at least where we’re concerned.

But then I feel it.

A sharp current at the back of my neck, the unmistakable weight of being watched. I lift my eyes and freeze.

Vaughn is standing across the courtyard, staring directly at me.

His face is unreadable at first, then suddenly not at all, rage flickers across his features like lightning, striking so hard I can almost feel it physically. His jaw is tight, eyes dark, and I realize-

Shit. He's *mad*. Again.

I glance around automatically. There are too many people here. We're not supposed to be seen near each other on campus, let alone this obviously locked in some silent war of expression.

"Yulian?" Annie's voice draws my attention. "What…" I watch as her eyes follow my gaze until they catch on Vaughn, making her pause.

I glance at her quickly. "I think I might need to go."

I look back toward where Vaughn was and catch him turning on his heel, heading for the car park. His shoulders are tense, his movements sharp. He's leaving.

No.

I can feel the spike of frustration tighten in my chest.

Annie sees it too. "Go," she tells me, her eyes trained on his retreating back.

I don't reply, already getting up to jog toward my car. The only reason I don't run is to avoid drawing attention to myself. I already know where he's going.

-

By the time I pull up outside the cottage, Vaughn's bike is already there. The engine still ticks faintly in the quiet, cooling down like it just got here. Maybe five or six minutes ahead of me, tops.

But the second I open the front door, time collapses.

It looks like he's been here for hours.

The place is absolutely wrecked.

The armchair is flipped, one of its legs cracked and twisted like it's been kicked into submission. The coffee table is shattered, a splintered ruin on the floor, glass and broken wood scattered in a fan across the rug. One of the curtains is half-torn from the rod, hanging like a defeated flag. A photo frame lies face-down on the floorboards, shards glinting beside it.

Everything is chaos.

And Vaughn is in the centre of it.

I freeze in the doorway, stunned. My hand is still on the knob.

He's breathing like a beast. Deep, furious breaths that rattle through his chest like a storm trying to claw its way out of his ribs. His fists are clenched, shaking. His shirt is half-torn, stretched across his shoulder from where he must've grabbed at it. There's blood on his knuckles, not a lot, but enough to make my stomach twist.

“Vaughn…?”

He doesn’t hear me. Or maybe he does, but whatever state he’s in, it’s louder than my voice.

He moves again, fast, smashing something else I hadn’t even noticed in his hands. A bowl, maybe. It clatters against the floor and shatters with a violence that feels personal.

I step forward without thinking. “Hey- hey, stop. What the fuck are you doing?”

Nothing. No answer. No recognition in his eyes. Just an inferno boiling under his skin.

I get closer, trying to catch his wrist, but he jerks away from me like I’m a spark about to burn him. He shoves me hard, and I stumble into the wall with a thud.

“Get off me!” he snaps, voice raw and strangled. “Don’t fucking touch me!”

I go still, watching him.

He’s not…here. Not really. He’s somewhere else entirely. Whatever he’s seeing, it isn’t me. It’s not this room. His whole body is trembling like it’s too full, like it can’t contain whatever’s raging through him. His chest heaves. He’s pacing like a caged animal, and I can’t tell if he’s going to hit the wall or drop to his knees.

“Vaughn,” I try again, slower. “Talk to me.”

I’m unsure what direction to go in with him. Calm, in an attempt to make him feel the same, or match his energy and rage back.

His head snaps toward me and for a second I think he might actually lunge. His pupils are blown wide, mouth twisted like he’s choking on fury. Like the inside of him is being flayed raw and he’s barely holding it together.

“You-” he starts, then cuts off, his hands flying into his hair like he wants to rip it out. “You were with her. Talking. Like nothing. Like I wasn’t-”

“Annie?” I blink, stunned. “You’re- you’re this worked up over me talking to Annie?”

At first when he walked away, I had just thought it was because of her, but when I saw the state of the cottage, I had thought there must be something else to it. There’s no way he is so worked up over just that, surely?

“Don’t say her name like I’m fucking crazy!” he roars. “You don’t get it, Yulian! You don’t fucking get it!”

He shoves the bookshelf next, not even looking at it, and a row of books spills across the floor, a few landing with their spines cracked and splayed open like broken necks.

I don’t flinch; I don’t move at all. I’m too busy contemplating my next move. My heart’s pounding. I’ve seen Vaughn angry before, cruel, cold, furious. But this? This is something else. This is violent. Untethered.

I’m hit with the memory of that other time he saw Annie and I together, yet appeared to walk away without a care. Is this how he actually reacted when he got alone?

I take a careful step forward. “You need to breathe. Just stop and look at me, Vaughn. I’m not your fucking enemy.”

He lunges, not at me, but toward me, and I brace, thinking he’s going to strike. But his hands just slam into the wall on either side of my head, trapping me between his arms. He’s close enough that I can see every flicker of tension in his jaw, every vein in his neck. His body is rigid with rage, chest brushing mine from how hard he’s breathing.

“Why does it feel like you’re always slipping away from me?” he growls. “Like the second I turn my back, you're gone. Or you're laughing with someone else. Or you’re choosing anyone but me.”

His voice is wrecked. Not just angry, but desperate. And that desperation crawls under my skin like a live wire.

I don’t move. I let him look at me, let him burn.

“You know I’m not with anyone else,” I say patiently, though said patience is quickly running out.

He laughs, bitter and hoarse. “That’s not the fucking point. You don’t-

you don't understand! It won't- it won't come out right, I can't say it right and you don't understand."

Like he says, I don't understand. I don't understand what is happening, why he is saying the things he is saying. I don't understand any of it. But the worst thing I don't understand, is how to help him.

"Then what is the point, Vaughn?"

"You make me-" He stops. His hand clenches beside my head. "You make me feel like I'm going to explode."

I stare at him. And then I huff, "Vaughn, look at this fucking place. You already did explode."

That finally cuts through the haze in his expression. His eyes flicker, darting around, maybe seeing the destruction for the first time. His mouth opens slightly. His hands drop from the wall.

"I didn't-" he starts.

But he doesn't finish.

Instead, he surges forward and kisses me like a man possessed.

His mouth crashes into mine with a force that jolts through my whole body, teeth and lips and fury. I kiss him back just as hard, our bodies colliding with all the tension of the storm he just unleashed. His hands

are in my hair, on my jaw, gripping like he's holding on for dear life.

It's not soft. It's not careful.

It's unhinged.

We stumble backward, knocking into the wall, into broken furniture. His fingers yank at my shirt. Mine grab his waistband. Everything is loud, brutal, urgent.

His mouth drags to my jaw. "I need-" he rasps, voice shaking. "I need to burn it off-"

"Then burn it," I breathe against his throat.

And then he's dragging me down the hall.

-

Vaughn

-

I know I'm not in complete control right now. But I don't care. I can't, not even if I wanted to.

My whole body is on fire. And not because of the lust, but because of the rage that burns inside me, that consumes me and begs to explode.

I need it out. I need him to help me get it out.

Pushing Yulian toward the bedroom, we groan and we grunt as our bodies fight for dominance. Though, where my battle is for true control, his only feigns it, as instead he merely gives me what he thinks I need.

I shove Yulian backwards onto the bed, and he lands with a bounce, immediately pushing himself backwards up the bed. I don't hesitate to climb on top of him, claiming his mouth in a rough kiss.

His tongue thrusts into my mouth as I nip at his bottom lip. My hand reaches between us and cups his cock through his jeans, and I can feel how hard it is already. Yulian moans at the pressure as I begin rubbing him rhythmically.

In similar fashion, Yulian too slips his hand between us so we're mutually pleasuring one another. After a few minutes, the burning builds too high and I need our clothes off. I rip at his shirt, tearing it almost in two. Yulian finishes the job for me, before he returns the favour.

Both fumbling with our bottom halves, we're naked soon enough.

"Fuck, Mishka," Yulian grunts as I start mouthing down his neck and onto his chest, biting at the 'V' scar carved onto it. I know how much he loves it when I worship it, reminding him again that he's mine. It's written into his skin.

Yulian's hands begin sliding down my body and for a reason I can't explain, another wave of anger surges through me. I hate it, I hate it, I hate it.

But I can't stop it.

My own hands grab his and wrench them above his head. "No," I command.

I need to be in complete control. I crave it. I burn with it.

My cock rubs against his stomach, and I speed up, grinding myself over and over, barely even acknowledging him. However, I feel him kissing at my neck and I lean into the touches.

His head turns toward my ear. "Take what you need, baby," he whispers.

So I do.

I stand up and move toward the draws. It's something I have been thinking about for a long time. It had been planned for a very different circumstance. But I know that I need it more than ever right now.

I open the top draw and pull out my chains. They're precious to me, my favourite weapon of choice. Carved into each of them is '*V.M'*. Mine.

And by extension, whoever they find themselves wrapped around. Whoever they hold, is mine too. Mine to do with as I please.

I turn back to Yulian, gazing at his expression. At first there is surprise, but it quickly turns to lust as he moves even further toward the headboard. Holding a chain in each hand, I walk swiftly toward him, climbing onto the bed and crawling until I'm sat on his lap, with him sat up against the headboard.

Without saying a word, I take each chain and tie each of Yulian's wrists to each corner of the headboard. Then I lean in again and kiss him viciously, I feel his arms yanking at the chains, desperate to touch me. Grinding myself against him in a teasing manner, I allow my own hands to run up and down his chest until they finally wrap around his cock, stroking him hard and fast.

My tongue licks over his neck a few times, until I bite down hard. He chokes, shocked, and I feel a twinge of iron on my tongue. When I pull back, I see the clear indent of my teeth on him and excitement bubbles inside of me. It even, to an extent replaces some of my fury.

Yulian grins at me, knowing what mark I've just left on him. "Go on baby," he tells me, "take your pleasure."

I moan at just his words, before leaning over to grab the half-empty bottle of lube on the nightstand. Yulian leans back a bit, spreading his legs, but I stop him. I know what I need right now.

Rather, I sit in front of him, coating one hand in lube. Then, I reach behind me and slide one digit into myself, immediately thrusting it in and out. Yulian yanks against the chains again, trying to lean toward me.

His cock stands tall and hard against his stomach, just from the sight of me. His eyes are practically glazed over in lust as I add a second finger.

“Oh, Yulian,” I groan.

Both the bed and chains rattle as he again yanks against them. “Fuck, Mishka,” Yulian throws his head back, “don’t you know what you’re doing to me?”

A third finger slides in and I feel so full already, my mouth watering at what it’s going to feel like with Yulian’s cock inside me. All I can think about is the need to burn off the fire raging inside me. My entire body singes with the craving.

With the hand not currently inside me, I grab my own cock, sliding my fist up and down it. I wish I could say I was putting on a show for him, but I’m not. I’m simply doing as he asked; taking my own pleasure.

Finally, I pull my fingers away and let go of my cock, moving forward to sit properly on Yulian’s lap. As our skin makes contact, Yulian sighs like it’s the greatest high in the world.

“So fucking hot, Mishka.”

He trails kisses all over my neck as I reach around myself to grab his cock, lining it up with my hole. I slide it over a few times, before pushing in the head.

Yulian hisses, throwing his head back. I grip his shoulders as I lower myself onto his cock, down and down until finally he’s all the way in.

I don't give him a moment to get used to it, to relish in the feeling. My fury still burns and I need it to burn out. With a grip tight enough to leave bruises, I hold onto to him as I begin fucking myself on his cock, over and over. Moving up and down, my eyes closed, not taking a moment to acknowledge the man whose giving me this high.

I move fast and hard, my thighs burn but I don't stop. The bed creaks with every thrust as the chains clank loudly. I can tell by the volume it's not just from my movements, but also from him desperately trying to rip away from them so he can put his hands on me. But my chains are too perfect.

Changing my angle so that my cock grinds between our stomachs on every bounce, I let out a deep moan.

I feel like an animal, rabid and violent. I don't care for anything around me, only my own survival, my own pleasure. I feel the energy dissipating the longer I go, the more I tire myself. I chase the feeling I crave, an orgasm I'm desperately hurtling toward.

I build into a rapid rhythm, my breaths turning short. His cock stretches me to perfection, and when it finally starts slamming my prostate exactly on every thrust, I know this isn't going to last much longer.

"I'm so close baby. So close. Tell me what you want. I'll give you whatever you want," Yulian rambles. I look at him through hooded eyes and true to his word, I recognise his face, the clear signs his orgasm is near.

One of my hands moves from his shoulders to instead wrap around his throat and he grins at me, his eyes rolling back. Mine do the same.

"*Yulian.*"

My vision bursts as I finally cum, shooting across our stomachs. I bounce a few more times before I feel the familiar feeling of being filled with cum as Yulian, too, finishes inside me.

My thighs quicker and I breath heavily, my forehead resting against his. Moving my hand from his throat, I notice the redness around it, and it makes me smile.

I'm so exhausted, but, thankfully, I no longer feel like I'm burning. Like I need to lash out at every little thing, like I have no control over anything at all. As usual, as expected, the regret comes rushing in. The guilt of what I've done.

However, when I look at Yulian's blissed out face, grinning devilishly at me, the blame lessens, just slightly.

I kiss him.

-

The room is quiet now. The kind of quiet that feels thick and fragile, like glass stretched thin, humming under pressure. Yulian's breath is warm against my shoulder, his fingers idly tracing along the bare skin of my stomach. I can still feel the ghost of everything that just happened, his mouth, my hands, his body, and yet the silence stretches tighter and tighter with each second we don't speak.

My eyes trail along the deep bitemark I left on his neck. A surge of possessiveness burns through me, but the good kind, thankfully.

I know he wants answers. I know he deserves them. But every time I think about him *knowing*, my skin crawls.

I don't expect the peace to last long. And it doesn't.

"Are you going to tell me what happened earlier?" His voice is soft, but they slice through me anyway.

I tense.

He feels it.

He lifts himself up on one elbow, and though I keep my eyes trained on the ceiling, I know he's watching me.

"Vaughn," he says.

I don't answer.

"Vaughn," he's growling now.

I still say nothing. What can I say?

He grabs my chin and forces me to look him in the eye. "Answer me," he demands. "You are the one who said we need to communicate. So fucking do it, *Mishka*. You will tell me what just happened or I will

make you.”

I shift beneath the sheets. “It’s fine now, isn’t it?”

“Don’t do that.” His voice is sharp. “Don’t change the subject. I gave you what you needed in the moment. I let you take it. Now it’s your turn. Whatever ridiculous ideas going on inside your head right now, get rid of them. Nothing in the world will ever make you any less *mine*. So start talking.”

“It doesn’t matter,” my voice comes out shaky.

Yulian huffs through his nose, before sighing. “It matters to me.” His voice is slightly softer, as if he is trying a different tactic to get me to talk.

My jaw clenches. I roll onto my side, facing away from him. But he doesn’t let me go. He follows me, curling behind me, his hand pressed to the dip of my spine like an anchor.

“Vaughn,” he says again. It’s quiet and careful, but relentless. I know he’s not going to stop until I give him what he wants.

I stare at the wall.

My throat feels tight. My chest too. I could lie. God, I want to lie. It would be so easy to shrug and say it was just stress.

But none of that would be the whole truth.

And for some reason, tonight, after everything, I want to tell him.

I swallow. My mouth is dry. My lips form the words I want to say, but I struggle to push them out. Once I say them, I can never take them back. He'll know, just like everyone else.

"Do you know what IED is?"

There's a long pause. I feel his body stiffen behind me, as if with realization.

Then, quietly: "I've heard of it."

I nod, but I still can't turn around. My eyes focus on the wall ahead.

"After the kidnapping, things started changing. At first it was small, I'd lose my temper over stupid things. A broken glass. Someone walking too slow in front of me. But it didn't stop. It got worse. Louder. Bigger."

Yulian doesn't say anything.

"At first, my parents thought it was just part of the trauma. PTSD. Which, yeah, that too. But when I started blacking out in fits of rage, when I broke my hand punching a wall at twelve, when I slammed my driver's head against the car window because he took a wrong turn…"

I shut my eyes.

“They took me to a psychologist. And she said I had Intermittent Explosive Disorder. IED. It’s not… it’s not just anger. It’s like this- this heat that floods my whole body. I lose control. I can’t think. Everything burns. And then, after, I don’t even recognize myself.”

Yulian’s hand doesn’t move.

I force myself to keep going.

“I’d get these episodes. Huge, violent bursts over the smallest things. And then they’d vanish, as if they never happened. But the wreckage stayed. People learned to walk around me like I was a grenade. Even when I wasn’t angry, they looked at me like I was about to be.”

My voice falters. I press the heel of my palm to my forehead.

“My dad is *Kirill Morozov*,” I whisper. “His ability to stay calm, stoic even, in every situation is just a small part of the reason he’s so respected as Pakhan. He never loses his cool, can always think straight. A brilliant manipulator, a perfect leader. And then there’s me. His only son. His heir. A fucking mess who can’t even keep it together when someone looks at him the wrong way.”

I finally risk a glance over my shoulder.

Yulian’s eyes are on me. Quiet. Steady. His eyes fixate on me for a few moments, before he finally leans down and places the gentlest kiss on my jaw I think I’ve ever felt.

“Mishka.” Another kiss. “It’s not your fault. I understand-” he says.

And that, that sets something off in me.

“No,” I snap, jerking up to sit. “You don’t. Don’t fucking say that.”

He sits up too, blinking, but I can’t stop now. The pressure’s rising again, surging up my throat.

“You don’t understand what it’s like to feel like you’re going to explode all the time. To have people look at you like you’re defective. To try your hardest to be calm, to breathe, to count to ten, and still end up breaking something.”

I shove a hand through my hair. My skin is hot. “You don’t understand what it’s like to be raised to be perfect, to be trained to become a leader, a symbol of power, and know everyone is thinking: ‘he can’t do it. He’s unstable. He’ll ruin us all.’”

Yulian reaches for me, but I flinch away.

“Vaughn,” he says, “I’ve said it before, and I’ll say it again. It doesn’t matter what those fuckers think. You are the heir. You are the Pakhan’s son. Fuck everyone else.”

“It’s not just about them!” My voice cracks. “It’s everyone. Everyone knows. The Heathens, my family, the bratva, everyone.”

I breath heavily. “And *I* know. I remember every episode. I remember

what I was thinking, what I was feeling. I remember how little control I have. How I got worked up over the smallest, tiniest thing and blew it completely out of proportion because I can't restrain myself."

My head shakes around, like I'm trying to force it to focus. "Did you know I was just like my dad before yours took me? Everyone always said how mature I was for my age, how responsible, how respectful. They said I'd make a better Pakhan than my own father one day if I kept it up. That's who I was."

My face scrunches up in pain. "Then I went to that basement, and I came back completely and utterly *broken*."

Yulian grabs my wrist, pulling me toward him. "Look at me, Vaughn," I do, "you are the bravest, strongest person I've ever met. That boy that existed before the basement might be gone, but that doesn't fucking matter. The man, sat here, right now," he gestures to me, "is going to be the greatest leader the Bratva has ever known one day, aside from myself, of course."

I crack a smile.

He continues, "and you will show every one of your men just how brilliant you can be. I don't ever want to hear you describe yourself as broken again, Vaughn. I will spend every day of the rest of our lives proving just how perfect you are if I have to."

I let out a shaky breath, unsure how to respond.

When I fail to say anything, he sighs. "What do you need?"

“What?”

“What do you need?” He repeats. “From me. What can I do to help you? You said your parents took you to a psychologist. Didn’t they help at all in the last eight years?”

I gape at him for a few seconds, surprised by his answer. “Yeah. They did help a lot, actually. I saw her one a week for a few years. She helped with the PTSD, too.”

I see Yulian flinch at that, remembering what I got the PTSD from.

“But, also…” I debate whether I should say the next thing, but, communication, right?

“Camilla helped a lot,” I admit. Yulian’s jaw tightens. “She spent a lot of time learning about IED, how to help someone with it. She got to know my episodes, how they worked, what triggered them etcetera. She helped a lot.”

I can see how badly Yulian wants to lash out. But, to his credit, he doesn’t.

Instead, he says, “so you don’t see her anymore? The therapist?”

“No. It was never perfect, but I did get better. Psychologist said it could have been because the therapy was working, or because of my changing hormones from puberty, that some people grow out of it with age.”

I exhale slowly, dragging a hand down my face. “By the time I was getting ready to start university, I had a pretty tight leash on it. And the few times I didn’t, Camilla was there. I was okay.”

I look up, meeting his gaze.

“And then you came back.”

Yulian stiffens.

I watch him carefully. “And it got worse again.”

He says nothing.

“I think…” I hesitate. This is the main reason I hadn’t wanted to tell him in the first place, not after seeing how he reacted to what I’ve already said about my time in the basement. But, if I’ve gotten this far, I can go all the way.

Then, quietly, “I think you might be a trigger.”

Yulian flinches like I’ve struck him. He turns his face away, but I see the tightening in his jaw, the flicker in his eyes.

It was always worst when he would send the videos, the messages. It was because I thought he was taunting me, showing me how little he cared about what he did. Any major reminders of the basement were triggers in their own way, but him worst of all.

He tries to disguise it, his voice is even when he asks, “Do you…?” he trails off, unable to make eye contact. “Do you need space?”

I answer instantly. “No.”

His eyes dart back to mine.

“I don’t want space,” I repeat, firmer. “You are still mine, Zmejka.”

A smile finally quirks his lips as he raises an eyebrow. “Zmejka?”

“Well, I figured if I was your *little bear*, then you can be my *little snake*,” I laugh lightly, “we match.”

The nickname was something I’ve been considering for a while, I’ve just been trying to decide on the perfect one. While I know Yulian isn’t exactly little, I like the idea of having a matching nickname with him.

I had also been waiting for the right moment to tell him, to call him it for the first time, but it never felt right. I always knew I was keeping something from him, and it felt wrong to take that sort of step while he still didn’t know. But now he does, and it feels right.

I reach out, fingers brushing his. “I know today was bad. But I swear, it is getting better again, since I’ve known the truth. Since you told me everything. It’s like… it’s like the knots in my chest are starting to come loose.”

Yulian watches me for a long moment. Then he nods, slow and careful.

“I don’t know how to help you,” he murmurs. “But I want to.”

“I don’t know how to help myself,” I say. “But I’m trying.”

He shifts closer, his fingers sliding up my chest to rest over my heart.

“We’ll figure it out.”

“Even if I lose it again?”

“Especially then.”

We fall quiet again. Not the fragile kind of silence, but something softer. Tired. Real.

Yulian leans in, pressing his forehead to mine. His hand is warm over my heart, and for the first time in a long time, I don’t feel like it’s about to burst.

I feel seen.

-

The mansion looms as I step through the front doors, too quiet for how busy it always is. My boots echo faintly against the floor, and I shove my hands into my jacket pockets like it'll keep the thoughts from clawing their way out.

The last week has been a lot. A lot of good, but still a lot. So many conversations between Yulian and I. His passion and focus on truly understanding my disorder and how he can best help me has shocked me. I knew he cared for me, of course, but he's always so unserious.

Yet, over the last week, I've seen several printed out articles about IED, background checks into my old therapist in case I need to start speaking to her again, practised breathing exercises focused on lessening anger, all from the man who has not once made me feel badly about my condition throughout all of this.

The best part about it, for me at least, is that in return, I've managed to get Yulian to open up a lot. I've heard more about his sister, who I still have yet to meet, though I'm hoping it won't be long, as well as their love for baking. He brought me some chocolate chip cookies they made together, and they were absolutely divine.

Finally, just today, he admitted to me that he's gay. I was a little surprised, at first, as I know he has been with girls. But when he went deeper and explained the pressure of it, I understood. However, it has got me thinking a lot about my own sexuality. Until now, it has sort of been on the backburner while I think about everything else going on.

But with Yulian and I in a good place, I have been considering it a lot more lately. That's why I've decided to go to none other than my best friend. I gave him great advice once upon a time, why can't he do the same for me?

I find Gareth in the library, curled sideways in one of the leather armchairs with a mug of what looks like hot chocolate, but smells oddly of strawberries balanced precariously on the armrest, a book in one hand, phone in the other. Kayden's nowhere in sight, but his jacket is slung over the other chair. It could mean he's somewhere near, but it could also be that Gareth has just stolen his jacket, which he tends to do quite often.

"Hey," I greet.

Gareth glances up. "Well, if it isn't my favorite heir to the Bratva throne."

I give him a look. "I'm the only heir."

"So?"

I snort. "Can I sit?"

"You asking for permission now?" He waves to the chair opposite him. "Go on, then. What's eating you?"

I drop into the seat. For a few seconds, I just stare at the empty fireplace. The silence stretches.

"I've been thinking about my sexuality quite a bit. What I might call myself, I mean."

Gareth grins. "Well, I'd say it's a pretty safe bet that you're not

straight.

I roll my eyes.

Gareth is quiet for a moment. Then he says, “For what it’s worth, I never really liked labels.”

I blink at him. “Yeah?” I already sort of knew this, of course, he’s always refused to put a name on his sexuality, prefer to just say he likes Kayden, and that’s that.

“Yeah. I mean, sure, if someone asks, I’ll say I’m queer. But that’s mostly to avoid explaining the whole speech every time. The truth is, I don’t care much about what it’s called. I like Kayden. That’s all that matters to me.”

I nod slowly. “That makes sense.”

“But you’re not me,” Gareth adds, watching me. “If having a label makes you feel more grounded, more certain, that’s okay too. Everyone moves through this differently.”

I sigh, dragging my fingers along the armrest. “I think it would help. To have a word for it. Something to hold onto.”

I’ve spent too much of my life feeling like I don’t have control. I feel like I need this thing, this label, to have a better idea of who I am, so I am more capable of controlling who I am. I admire Gareth for feeling so confident in himself for not needing to know, but I do.

Of course, I have a good idea of my sexuality, after all, I have done research on it before, but I would like to be sure.

"You should take one of those online quizzes," Gareth says with a smirk.

I look up at him. "What, like an *Am I Gay?* quiz?"

"Exactly."

I scoff. "I was joking."

"I wasn't," he replies with a grin. "Why not? Might be a good place to start."

I raise an eyebrow. "You think I should figure out my sexuality based on a Buzzfeed quiz?"

"Not Buzzfeed," he says, mock-offended. "Those are way too vague. You want something more tailored. Try a proper sexuality spectrum quiz. There are a few good ones out there."

I shake my head, but there's a reluctant smile tugging at the corner of my mouth. "I feel ridiculous."

Gareth sobers a little, though his expression stays warm. "Look, Vaughn. You're allowed to take your time. You're allowed to explore this without needing to know all the answers today. You've been through a lot. This is just another step forward."

I nod. My throat's tight, but I manage to get out, "Thanks."

"Anytime."

He's right. I don't need all the answers today. But I sure would like them. I glance at Gareth. "So… where do I find one of these non-Buzzfeed quizzes?"

He grins. "Awesome. Come on, I find a good one."

-

We sit on the floor of Gareth's bedroom like a pair of overgrown teenagers, his laptop between us. He's still grinning like this is the best part of his week.

Gareth raises a brow. "You ready?"

I sigh. "Yeah, sure. Enlighten me, quiz overlord."

He snorts and clicks into the site. "Alright. Eight questions. All multiple choice. 'To what extent do you agree with this statement,' blah blah blah."

"God, could it sound more clinical?"

He pokes my side. “Quit whining. Let’s begin.”

“One. ‘You have enjoyed or enjoy fantasizing about being intimate with someone of the same gender as you.’”

Gareth wiggles his eyebrows at me and smirks. “Pretty sure I already know the answer to that one.”

My mind flickers, unhelpfully, to Yulian. His mouth. His voice. The sound he makes when I press too hard, kiss too deep, bite his bottom lip and pull. The feeling in my stomach when I see him walk into a room.

“Agree,” I say stubbornly.

Gareth nods like he’s proud. “Don’t worry dude, me too.”

He clicks a button on the screen.

“Two. ‘You have enjoyed or enjoy fantasizing about being intimate with someone of the opposite gender as you.’”

This one is pretty easy, too. While Yulian is definitely better, I did still enjoy sex with Camilla.

“Agree.”

I hear a light tap.

“Three. ‘You would consider being in a serious relationship with someone of the same gender.’”

This question sits heavier in my chest. I watch as Gareth very unsubtly side-eyes me. I give him a deadpan look and he shrugs his shoulders, unashamed about his curiosity.

What is my answer? Could Yulian and I be in a serious relationship? Long-term? I mean, I think we can certainly want to, but could we actually make it work in any way?

Though, I suppose that isn’t really the question. Either way, however, admitting out loud I’d be willing to be in a serious relationship with Yulian is big step from what we are right now. But, I know that anything against this statement would be a lie to myself.

I want Yulian, longer than I’ll ever allow myself to admit.

“Agree,” I murmur. My voice sounds rough.

Gareth nods. “It’s actually way better than it sounds. You get to do stuff together. I fought against Kayden for ages, but it was worth it in the end. Plus, I don’t even regret the fighting, it was super hot. Wait, you and Yulian fight all the time. Do you guys have post-fight sex too?”

I stare coldly at him.

“Right. Moving on.”

Gareth pointedly avoids eye contact as he clicks.

“Four. ‘You would consider being in a serious relationship with someone of the opposite gender.’”

This one is easy.

“I have been,” I say before the question finishes. “So yes.”

Gareth taps ‘Agree’ and doesn’t comment.

“Five. ‘Sex is an important part of the relationship.’”

I give him a flat look. “Seriously? You’re asking me this?”

“It’s on the quiz, man,” Gareth laughs.

I do consider the question. I really, really like sex.

“Dude,” Gareth says, “why so much thought? We both know what the answer is.”

He’s right. I love having sex.

Gareth's grin doesn't falter as he clicks 'Agree'.

"Six. 'Gender is completely irrelevant in deciding if you are attracted to someone.'"

I pause.

This one makes me think.

Because gender is important in making decisions about those I'm interested in. God knows I would not be so secretive about Yulian if he weren't a man. However, that doesn't necessary play a part in if I'm attracted to him or anyone else.

But, on the other hand, I do take account of certain things. Whether the skin is soft or muscled, if the hands are dainty or rough, whether their hair is long and silky or short and spiky. I don't necessarily enjoy one more than the other (I think I'd just like whichever one applied to Yulian most), but I do note them.

"Disagree," I say finally. "I notice it. It's not everything, but it's not nothing."

Gareth just hums and inputs the answer.

"Seven. 'You only feel sexually attracted to someone when you have an emotional connection to them.'"

Once again, I consider it thoroughly. My emotional connection with

Yulian is already much stronger than the one I had with Camilla. Though I wouldn't necessarily say that's why I'm attracted to him, or why I was attracted to her.

Not to mention, I've certainly admired people and thought they were hot even though they were a stranger, so the statement doesn't feel very correct to me.

"No," I say eventually.

Gareth hums. "I think I'd have gone the other way."

Nonetheless, he clicks on 'Disagree' for me.

"Eight. 'You are surrounded by many members of the LGBTQ+ community.'"

That one makes us both laugh.

"Damn, yeah. You, Nikolai, Killian, uncle Maks, uncle Ant."

"Niko's going to rip Jer a new one when he finds out about you," Gareth jokes, "the only straight member of the Heathens. Niko's going to have so much fun."

He clicks 'Agree' without me having to even tell him. It is pretty obvious, to be fair.

with what feels like insulting speed. Gareth reads over it first, his expression turning thoughtful. He glances up at me with something that isn't quite smug, but close.

I remember he said that there were eight questions, so the answer must be here.

"Well," Gareth says, dragging the quiz results back onto the screen, "that's about as bisexual as it gets."

The screen demonstrates straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual, asexual and demisexual all with various percentages. Bisexual is at one hundred. Pretty slam dunk.

I snort under my breath, folding my arms across my chest. "Yeah? That your professional diagnosis?"

He flashes me a playful smile. "The quiz doesn't lie."

I look back at the screen, at the stupid, simplified quiz we just took as a joke, or at least that's what I told myself at first. But the answers sit there like fact now. Clean, sharp lines of self-definition where before there was uncertainty.

Gareth seems to observe my reaction, as his face turns serious for a moment. "You know, this really was just a fun quiz. It doesn't have to mean anything. Or it does. Whichever you prefer."

I ponder it for a few moments. Bisexual had seemed the most obvious

from the start, I had just been hesitant to commit to the label until I was sure. I wanted the control, yes, but if I chose a label and then didn't feel right about it, I think I'd feel even less control than before.

"No," I say. "I like that. I'm bisexual."

It may be Yulian that I'm interested in now. But that doesn't change the way I've felt about women in the past. I like a man right now, but I am capable of liking both.

"Cool," Gareth says in response. "Do you feel different?"

"Um," I question, "a bit, I guess."

I feel a bit calmer, really, like an ich that has finally been scratched. I feel more confident in my ability to keep control, as this is finally something else that I hold some restraint over.

"Hm," Gareth hums thoughtfully. "Who knew online quizzes could be so helpful?"

I laugh and jokingly swat him on the arm.

"What?" Gareth grins. "Worked, didn't it?"

"I guess." I roll my eyes.

"Bisexual," I test again, murmuring. "I like it."

“That’s the thing about labels,” Gareth says. “They’re supposed to help you understand yourself, not box you in. If ‘bisexual’ fits you, use it. If it stops fitting, you don’t owe anyone permanence.”

“I like it because it makes things… clearer.” I tap my finger against the table. “I like knowing where I stand. I like the idea of a word for what I am. Something definite.”

Gareth nods. “That makes sense. You’re a control freak.”

“I’m a perfectionist,” I correct.

“Same difference,” he says with a grin.

We sit in silence for a minute. A rare kind of quiet between us, not awkward, not strained. Just still. My thoughts settle around me, slower, calmer. It feels good to know I have Gareth on my side, someone who knows everything and doesn’t judge me for it.

“You think it’ll ever actually mean anything?” I question quietly.

Gareth looks up from his phone. “What do you mean?”

I hesitate, then gesture vaguely around the room. “This world. My position. My family. Everything I’ve been raised to be. There’s a mold for a mafia heir. You know it as well as I do. And bisexuality doesn’t exactly fit cleanly into that mold.”

Gareth raises an eyebrow, “you do know you’re not the first heir who isn’t straight, right?”

“Seriously,” he says. “You act like this whole place would explode if someone found out you like guys too. It wouldn’t.”

“You sound awfully confident for someone who hasn’t spent their whole life being watched under a microscope.”

“I don’t need to. Niko has demonstrated perfectly how easy it is to be with a man in our world. Him and Bran are doing great. Anyone that might disagree is way too scared. And he’s not even the future Pakhan.”

“It’s because I’m the future Pakhan that it’s not the same for me.”

“You think they’ll treat you different than they treated him?”

I don’t answer right away. Gareth hasn’t been raised as deeply within our world as I have, so I don’t think he would fully understand. He doesn’t understand the expectations of heirs, of gaining respect from other Bratvas from countries where the idea of two men dating isn’t as normal as it is for us.

I chew on the inside of my cheek. “You really think they won’t care?”

“They’ll care if you let it control you. If you walk around acting like you’re hiding some massive secret, people will sniff it out and weaponize it. But if you own it? If you keep being who you are and let the label be just a part of that? You’ll be fine.”

I rest my elbows on my knees, steepling my fingers. “I might talk to Niko.”

Gareth nods slowly. “I think that’s a good idea.”

“But not yet. I’d have to admit a lot more than just my sexuality, I think. And I am not ready for Nikolai to know I’m seeing Yulian. I think he’d have a heart attack.”

“All the more reason you should,” Gareth chuckles, “but in all seriousness, you don’t need to say anything until you’re ready, you know that, and you know I’ll keep your secret as long as you need me to.”

The weight on my chest shifts, easing just slightly.

“Yeah,” I say. “Thanks, dude.”

He leans forward, resting his arms on the table. “You know,” he adds casually, “coming out doesn’t have to be some big emotional spectacle. You’re not announcing your engagement to the Pope. You’re just being honest about something.”

I smile faintly. “You make it sound simple.”

“It is simple. It’s the world that tries to make it complicated.”

I smile at him. “I guess you never really had a big ‘coming out’, at least not like Niko did,” we both laugh at the memory of the spectacle that was Niko’s coming out ‘party’, “since you didn’t have anything to come out as.”

He nods his head. “I thought I was straight until I kissed Kayden,” he replies without hesitation. “Then I thought I was gay. Then I realized I don’t give a damn what society thinks about the gender of the person I’m dating. As long as they can make me laugh and survive my bullshit, I’m down.”

“And get you strawberry flavoured hot chocolate, apparently.”

It’s taken me ages to figure that one out. I was baffled when I first saw the hot chocolate yet smelt strawberries. It’s been on my mind all day now.

Gareth laughs. “Yes, V, and someone that gets me strawberry flavoured hot chocolate. My dream man.”

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed.
first id like to thank littlemuse13 on tumblr for giving me the idea for the 'am i gay' quiz. i saw a post they made about it and i thought it was really fun! id also like to thank funtheysaid also on tumblr for the advice on vaughns nickname for yulian. i did consider the different options they gave me (though the poll came out to little snake as opposed to just snake). you can find the explanation they gave on my tumblr page still. i decided to go with the feminine version of it as they said it was sort of like a teasing version, and because i went with 'little' snake, whicih vaughn did purely to match with yulian/make fun of him a bit for it (plus he obvs knows yulian isnt actually little haha), so i felt like the nickname should be a little teasing in a way.
anyway its 2am here and im very tired i might do a longer post

on my tumblr (lucsf19) about the chap tomorrow or if someone does an ask about it ill just answer them, but for now ima go to bed lol.
thank you again for all your support <3.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chapter Notes

hi i hope you enjoy :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

Vaughn lies beneath me, still. Chest rising and falling with that slow, post-coital rhythm, a soft pink flush painted across his cheekbones, skin glistening with sweat, lashes fluttering like he's not entirely sure he's come back to earth yet. I grab him and turn us over so he's lying on top of me.

I press a kiss to the corner of his forehead and reach blindly for the blanket slung over the arm of the sofa. It's old, worn, smells vaguely of cedar and something faintly citrusy that might be Vaughn's laundry detergent. I shake it out, drape it over us both like we're two ordinary people who do ordinary things like cuddle after sex. He snorts when I tuck it around his shoulders but still curls into me.

I trail my fingers down his spine, feel him shiver even though he's warm. I store that reaction away like a dragon hoarding treasure.

"Favourite colour," I say suddenly, and Vaughn immediately sighs, rolling his eyes at me.

He shifts his head just enough to peer at me through heavy-lidded eyes. "You still on this?"

“Favourite colour,” I repeat, drawing lazy shapes between his shoulder blades. “Yours. What is it? Tell me or I’ll assume it’s beige, and I’ll never recover from the disappointment.”

He snorts again, buries his face in my neck. “You’re so fucking weird.”

I’ve been doing this a lot, just asking him random, simple questions to get to know him better. I want to know everything about him. Every detail, every thought, every memory. Anything I can get from him I store away in my mind under the list of ‘most important’.

“And you’re avoiding the question.”

He sighs like I’m exhausting, which is fair, because I am. “White. Like my mask.”

My jaw drops. “That’s terrible. Let’s go back. I’m happy with beige now. White isn’t even a real colour!”

“I don’t care,” he mutters into my skin. “How tragic, I’ve failed the Yulian Dimitriev Compatibility Quiz.”

“Baby, everything about you and me is compatible. We’ve just spent two hours straight proving it.” I wink and he nips at my jaw. “So, your mask is really just white because it’s your favourite colour?”

Vaughn shakes his head. “No, my favourite colour is white *because* it’s the colour of my mask. I didn’t really get a choice in the colour. There were only those five option and because I’m the *youngest*, I got last pick. Not like I’m their future *Pakhan* or anything…”

Vaughn trails off, grumbling under his breath, and I laugh loudly at his annoyance.

“Well, I for one find the mask super hot, even if it is in white.”

Vaughn nods his head, “well, obviously. It’s grown on me now, anyway. I have the best mask, without a doubt.”

He sounds incredibly sure of himself, and I nod in agreement.

Twirling a strand of his hair around my finger, I ask “favourite animal?”

“Ugh,” he says. “Seriously?”

“Don’t make me smother you with this blanket.”

He lifts his head just enough to glare at me, but there’s no venom in it. In fact, his expression slowly turns mischievous, as he leans in close to me.

“Well,” he whispers, “as of late, I’ve grown rather partial to snakes, *Zmejka*.”

I feel his fingers trace the snake tattoo on my chest. “Have you now?” I say flirtatiously back.

“Mhm. One snake in particular, in fact.” Vaughn closes the gap and presses a kiss to my lips, and I grin into it.

“And you?” he asks.

I chuckle. “I am also quite fond of snakes. Though, I’ve always had a soft spot for *bears*. Especially the little ones.”

Vaughn laughs too, kissing me again.

“Favourite TV show?” I push.

He groans. “You’re relentless.”

“I want to know *everything*, Vaughn,” I murmur into his ear, dragging my nose along his temple. “Every boring, irrelevant little thing about you. I want to catalogue your entire personality like I’m building a psychological profile.”

“You probably already have one,” he mutters. “I don’t really watch much TV; it’s never really interested me. But… Lidya and Maya were obsessed with F.R.I.E.N.D.S growing up. Always forced me to watch with them. Don’t tell them, but it wasn’t so bad.”

I nod in understanding. “Ross and Rachel are pretty iconic.” My own sister, too, forced me to watch it with her a few times. I suppose her, Lidya and Maya would get along quite well.

Vaughn hums. “I was always more partial to Chandler and Monica.

Though, Joey is really hot."

I growl and nip at his jaw, making him laugh. "Don't ever call another man attractive in my presence again. Or I'll hunt him down and give you his head in a box."

"And how exactly do you plan on killing a fictional character?"

"I'll find a way."

I mean it.

"Tati is a big fan of the show too," I say suddenly, remembering something. "Speaking of, she's getting angsty about how long it's taken to meet you. Says I'm being a selfish bastard by keeping you all to myself."

He perks up a little. "I was actually thinking," Vaughn continues, rubbing his foot along my calf under the blanket. "Maybe we could invite her here, to the cottage, and I'll cook."

I blink. "You'll *cook*?"

He smirks. "I'm not completely useless in the kitchen. I figured since I've eaten enough of her pastries to owe her my soul, which by the way, please get me more of those cookies, they taste how I imagine Heaven feels, I should probably try to impress her with something of my own."

I stare at him, stunned.

“How come you’ve never offered to cook for *me*?”

So not fair.

We’ve been seeing each other for what, like a month now? And he’s only offering to cook when it’s for my sister? I want to be the first to taste his food.

He shrugs his shoulders. “You never asked.”

What the fuck?

“Well, I’m asking now. Cook for me.”

Vaughn gives me a look.

“Please,” I grin and give my best puppy dog eyes.

Vaughn sighs, and glances at the clock. It is almost dinner time. “Fine.”

“Yes!”

We both scramble up, putting on our clothes. “Have you cooked for

anyone before?" I ask.

"Just Camilla and my parents," Vaughn answers.

A wave of jealously surges through me.

"Though, Camilla was vegetarian, so I didn't always have many options. I'll make something with meat this time, since I know you like it."

The jealously dissipates. So, even if I'm not the first person he has cooked for, I *am* the first person he is making this specific dish for. Hm. I'm counting that as a win, and the feeling of possessiveness and excitement rushes through me. Plus, I'm the first *man* he's cooked for (his dad doesn't count because I say so), and so this is yet another first I get to claim. First and last.

Vaughn starts listing what dishes he can make, asking which I'd prefer, and saying he'll pop to the shop quickly to grab the ingredients.

But, as he lists them, I feel a tingle settle in my chest. It's unfamiliar, and unknown. It's not bad, not at all, but I've never felt it before. It's about Vaughn, I know that for sure. But, before, all I've ever really known is possessiveness and obsessiveness in relation to him, yet this is neither. It's something different, something I don't understand.

It slots into place alongside my obsession, though it's not as dark, not as dangerous. Rather, it's calming, domestic even. I may not know exactly what this feeling is, but I know it's growing stronger.

And I'm more than welcoming to it.

-

Vaughn

-

Sat in the living room, the other Heathens and I pack away the papers scattered over the table in front of us. We're just finishing up a quick meeting about some business our parents delegated to us. Once we're done, everyone finds a spot to relax, as our chatter turns from serious, mafia-related topics to casual themes as we chill.

Killian moves so that he lounges in the armchair like he owns the place, while Gareth, Jeremy and I share the sofa. Niko claims the other armchair, flopping onto it dramatically with a sigh as he gazes longingly at the clock.

"Another hour until I see my lotus flower…" Niko mutters sadly.

"I hate sibling lunches," adds Killian with a grunt. I presume they're referring to the standing hangouts that Brandon, Landon and Glyndon have with one another frequently, which their partners are not invited to.

I've heard complaints about it many times, as I'm sure the King siblings have too, yet they refuse to relent.

"I'm seeing Cecily tonight, so don't expect me until again until tomorrow," Jeremy states and Niko immediately grins.

“Getting a lot of cardio in, hey Jer?”

Jeremy throws a pillow at him, prompting the rest of us to laugh. Gareth throws one of his own, too and Nikolai gives him a mock offended face.

“And here I was thinking about setting up another double date. Never mind, then.”

Killian chuckles. “Please, as if you would ever willingly share Bran’s attention.”

Gareth nods in agreement. “Let me guess, it was Bran who wants another double date, and you’ve failed to convince him not to?”

Niko huffs. “Shut up. As if you like the idea of sharing Kayden’s attention.”

Gareth’s grin falls.

“What have you been up to lately, Vaughn?” asks Killian, his gaze turning to me, “you haven’t been around much.”

His words are casual, but I can sense the hunt for drama in his tone. I’m not surprised they’ve started catching on how often I’m away. It’s a good thing that they spend so much time with their own partners, as otherwise it would be much more obvious to them just how much sneaking around I do these days.

“Yes, Vaughn,” adds Jeremy, “I haven’t heard anymore about Yulian and your war. Have you put a temporary hold on it?”

“Oh, fuck yeah,” says Nikolai. He grins, wide and unhinged. “That little prank war you and that slippery snake Yulian had going on? Fucking hilarious. Honestly, the highlight of my month. And now? Radio silence. What gives? I’ll totally help you plan more if you want.”

My mouth moves but nothing comes out. My friends are perceptive as hell, and I’m unsure of what I can say to make them drop this.

“You’re just in desperate need of something to do while your precious lotus flower is busy. Sad that he’d rather direct his attention elsewhere?” Gareth jumps in, taunting Niko in a clear attempt to change the subject, and I couldn’t be more thankful to him.

Brining up his boyfriend, especially anything negative about their relationship is a surefire way to get Niko talking about him.

However, Niko is unfortunately smarter than most give him credit for. “Don’t try to change the subject, Gaz, my lotus flower is always directing some attention at me.”

“The Serpents are pushing it again,” Nikolai continues, dragging a hand through his hair. It sticks up wild, like he’s been tugging at it all morning. “I got into a fight with a few of them outside campus a few days ago. And you guys know that I’ve been trying to avoid those for Bran’s sake, so it’s actually not my fault. You going to let that slide, Vaughn?”

“Of course not,” I reply, but my tone is distant. I’m scrolling through messages I’m not reading, trying not to imagine what Yulian’s doing

right now. I might be confident in the idea of telling Niko eventually, but today is not that day, and definitely not in front of the other Heathens.

Niko snorts. “You sure as hell don’t act like it. We should go back to that rat nest they call a mansion and torch the whole place. Or at least fuck up their cars again. That was awesome, by the way, V.”

Gareth shifts, subtle, but I feel his eyes on me.

“Seriously,” Niko continues, oblivious. “Let’s send a message. I say we grab one of their guards. Hell, maybe even Yulian himself.” He laughs, all teeth. “Imagine the look on his face. Wouldn’t that be something? Give him a few more scars and-”

“No.”

It leaves me sharper than I mean to. The word cuts through the room like a blade.

Everyone stills. Jeremy stiffens, eyes trailing me like he’s trying to figure me out. Killian tilts his head slightly, like a predator catching scent.

Niko blinks. “No?”

“You will not touch him.”

There’s a beat. My voice is hard, tight, trembling with something I

can't afford to let out. "None of you. Not a hair. Not a threat. Not even a goddamn glance that lasts too long. You understand?"

"What the fuck? So, what, only you can ruin his day?" Nikolai drawls slowly, eyes flicking from me to the others. "Didn't realize he was off-limits to the rest of us."

"He is," I say. "Under all circumstances. If anyone lays a finger on him, you answer to me."

My voice drops to something low and final. "And it won't be fucking pretty."

Just the idea of anyone, even those that I've grown up with, putting a single finger on him, especially to hurt him, makes me want to burn the world down. It has me teetering on the edge of another episode, even. He's mine, and I'll kill anyone that hurts him. I've seen enough scars on his body. There will be no more, not under my watch.

The silence that follows is heavy. Jeremy relaxes, and his expression seems to suggest he's figured out whatever he was thinking about. Killian's smile twitches at the corners, unreadable.

Nikolai raises his hands in mock surrender. "Alright, damn. Didn't know you were that protective of the little prince."

"I'm not." I say it too quickly. I roll my shoulders back, force calm into my limbs. "I'm the one heading operations for the Bratva in the UK now. I don't want unnecessary violence. Not with the Serpents, not with anyone. It complicates business. And, if there will be, it will be for me to go through with, not any of you. You won't like what happens if you disobey me."

“Sure,” Killian says lightly, but there’s something edged behind it. “Business.”

They don’t say anything else. They don’t push. But I know they don’t buy it, either.

I start feeling my body heat, and I know I need to get out of here soon. The combined stress with just a mere mention of harming Yulian has me too close to losing control again. Yulian has been great at calming me and helping me since I told him about my IED, but he’s currently sorting business of his own right now, and so not available to help.

My phone buzzes. Nothing important. Just a random notification from instagram. But I jump on the moment.

“Shit,” I mutter, standing. “I have to go, I’m meeting someone. I’ll see you guys later.”

Jeremy frowns slightly. “I thought you said you weren’t going out for another hour, aren’t you?”

I look at him. Cold. Blank. “I like being early.”

I’m already moving before anyone can call me on it. Grabbing my jacket, heading for the door like the house is on fire.

Because it is, kind of. Inside my chest, everything is burning.

-

I managed to calm myself down in the hour I sat on my bike, waiting until the time I was actually supposed to be meeting Jessie.

Since our last meet was cut short by my episode after seeing Yulian with Annie, we arranged to meet up at a coffee shop to have a quick catch up, especially as Yulian is still in his meetings, and likely will still be for most of the day.

Now, we've been sat chatting for the last hour or two. I thanked her properly for the work she did spying on Yulian for me all those months ago, though I also made it clear that sort of work was no longer needed and she was not to go near him at all.

The café's nice, it's popular, we've all been before. I sit across from Jessie, hands wrapped around a lukewarm mug, watching the way her hair falls into her eyes when she laughs.

Finally, I shake my head and finish off what's left in my cup. "Come on," I say, pushing back my chair. "Let's grab something sweet to go. I saw almond croissants when we came in."

Jessie stands, brushing crumbs off her jeans. "God, yes. I've been thinking about those for thirty minutes."

We head toward the counter and get two of the croissants, then pass by the wide front windows, and I'm mid-sentence, some dry remark about caffeine addiction, when I feel Jessie stop abruptly beside me.

I turn.

There's a girl who's just walked into the café, maybe ten feet away, caught mid-step. Her hand is frozen on the strap of her bag, grey eyes wide and locked onto the both of us. Her lips part slightly in visible disbelief.

Tati.

I recognize her from the photos that Yulian has shown me. I've seen her face more than once, usually while Yulian's ranting about something, usually with that rare softness in his voice as he excitedly shows me pictures of his baby sister as he rambles on about her.

I feel something like surprise, before smiling at her across the cafe. Of course, we have been meaning to meet for a while and though now isn't the best time, I'll still say hello.

So I step forward. "Tati, right?"

She doesn't move. Her gaze flickers between me and Jessie like she's watching a glitch in the universe. A fracture in reality.

"Hey," I try again, slower this time, a hand half-lifting in greeting. "I'm Vaughn."

I would think she must know what I look like, but maybe she's just caught up, not expecting to see me here so suddenly.

Still nothing, though. Her face is pale, her expression unreadable. Rather than looking back at me, her eyes are fixed on the person stood

beside me.

And that's when I look at Jessie.

She looks like she's about to be sick.

The colour has drained completely from her face, eyes wide, mouth pressed in a flat line. Like she's just realized she's standing on a landmine. Like she's praying no one moves.

What the hell?

I glance between them again. Jessie swallows visibly. Tati still hasn't blinked.

"How do you-" Tati starts, voice quiet, raspy. "How do you two know each other?"

Her eyes are still on Jessie.

Jessie opens her mouth. Closes it. Then clears her throat and says, "I… I grew up around him. We work together now. Sometimes."

It sounds like a confession. Like she's admitting to a crime. It's a bit skirmish of the truth, too. As if she is trying to make our friendship sound more casual, not to mention we don't work together sometimes, we work together all the time. When she's older, she'll take her parents place in our world, even if it is quite close to the outside of it.

Tati blinks. For a moment, she looks so much like Yulian it knocks the breath out of me. There's something steely in her gaze, something complicated and private that I know I'm not meant to see. She doesn't respond, just looks at Jessie, then back at me.

"I-" she starts again. Her voice falters. "It's nice to finally meet you, Vaughn. Yulian told me about… the dinner plans."

I nod, confused. "Right."

"He said you'd be cooking. I… I'm looking forward to it."

But her tone's all wrong. Like she's saying lines from a script she didn't agree to.

Then she turns on her heel and walks away. Fast.

Jessie hesitates. For half a second, she just stands there, eyes still following Tati's retreating form like she can't quite believe it either. Then she looks at me.

"I'm sorry," she blurts out, voice tight.

Before I can ask why, she turns and runs after Tati.

I stand there, holding two almond croissants in a paper bag that suddenly feels stupidly heavy.

What the hell just happened?

The door jingles behind me as someone enters, laughter and chatter filling the space again. But all I can focus on is the afterimage of Jessie's pale face and Tati's stunned silence. The way she looked between us, with such betrayal on her face. The way Jessie looked at her like she'd been caught lying.

Clearly, I'm missing something pretty big.

If this happened a few months ago, or even a year, I'd probably be a lot more concerned. An ally having some sort of relationship with Yulian Dimitriev's younger sister? Our enemy? But now, Yulian isn't my enemy. I'm still not quite sure what he is exactly, but I know whatever he is, it's a good thing.

So, this situation just has me intrigued more than anything. I guess it's something for Yulian and I to gossip about when I see him tomorrow.

-

The door clicks shut behind me and I step inside, expecting the quiet, the sterile peace of my home. But then I hear them, the soft voices, low laughter. And then I see them.

Brandon and Nikolai are curled together on the sitting room sofa like it's the most natural thing in the world. Brandon's legs are thrown over Nikolai's lap, his head tilted slightly as he laughs at something Nikolai just murmured. Nikolai has his hand resting on Brandon's knee, casually intimate. His mouth beams widely, no attempt to hide his big smile. Their bodies lean toward each other with the ease of

gravity, no hesitation. No shame.

It stops me in my tracks. Because they look so happy.

Of course, I already knew they were happy. But this was before I found something like what they have.

They look like the world weighs a little less when they're together. Like it becomes tolerable, maybe even soft, when filtered through each other. There's no caution in it. No hiding. Just comfort and ease and peace.

And I wonder, sharply, unexpectedly, if I'll ever have that.

What Yulian and I have is a secret. It's a violent history of hatred and lies with something tender and sweet trying to breath through it. Everyday, the breathing gets easier and easier, sure, but it doesn't erase what's still there. We meet behind locked doors. We insult one another in front of others like we don't share a bed most days.

But watching Brandon and Nikolai now… something unspools in my chest. A thought I haven't let myself entertain. A feeling I've kept boxed and buried beneath everything else.

I want that.

Not just the affection. Not just the ease. I want to *exist* with Yulian the way they exist together. I want to sit beside him and laugh and not worry about who sees. I want to fall asleep with his shoulder under my head, wake up to his voice without the fear of consequence. I want to *be* with him, not in secrecy, not in fragments, but entirely.

The realization hits like a spark against dry kindling. Sudden. Consuming. I hadn't even known the flame was so close.

I've spent so long convincing myself that what I feel for him is twisted, wrong, born of trauma and betrayal and too many shared scars. I told myself it was obsession. Possession. Something feral and malformed that mimicked affection because we were all each other had.

But it's *changing*.

It has been for a long time, hasn't it?

The way he hasn't once blamed me for falling for a lie. The way he never hesitates to announce and own the way he feels for me. How accepting and accommodating he has been of my IED without an ounce of judgement. I want to say it started the night we both finally knew the truth, but the seed was planet long before that, it was just only that night that I allowed it to grow.

The way I feel about him now isn't clean. It's not simple. But it's not just obsession anymore, either. There's something else blooming at the edges of it, something softer and slower and terrifyingly real.

And I want it.

God, I want it.

I want to touch him in public and not worry who's watching. I want to tell the other Heathens, I want to tell my *parents*. I want to *stop hiding*.

But I don't. I won't.

Because Yulian and I… we aren't them.

We're not Brandon and Nikolai. Niko… he might be an heir, but he is not *the* heir. There aren't as strong expectations of producing blood children, of upholding century old traditions. He isn't going to be the *Pakhan*.

And the Pakhan can't be with a man. Not like I want to be.

Still… the want lingers. It sits heavy in my throat, a wish I can't quite swallow down.

I look at them again. Brandon's hand has moved to Nikolai's chest now, resting over his heart. Nikolai doesn't even flinch. He just tips his head down and murmurs something too low for me to hear. Brandon smiles.

It's the same sort of smile I look at Yulian with every day.

I want it all.

And I might not be able to keep pretending that I don't.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you enjoyed
obviousy it hasnt been long since my last chap lol but i honestly

wrote this so quick it came so easy to me. also it is much shorter than my usual chapters, but i think most chapters from now on will be closer to this length. i had thought after the flashbacks finished, they would all be this length, but then they just werent lol. ig sex scenes are much longer than i thought haha. but without a flashack or sex scene, expect chapters to be closer to this length now. however that does mean chapters probably wont take as long.
thannk you for all the support <3.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Notes

> hi i know i said that chapter from now on would be shorter lol
> but i decided to combine three chapters into two, oops. im sure
> you guys dont mind tho haha.
> enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

Walking through the front door, I quickly hang my coat up and throw my shoes off as I head for the stairs. I've spent the whole day with Vaughn after we spent two apart as we've both been busy with business.

Technically, I'm not even finished yet, as I've still got a few meetings left and need to debrief my men afterwards, but I simply couldn't stay away from Mishka any longer. Sure, we had been texting to keep up, but it's not the same as being with him physically.

While I obviously enjoyed the time with him, he did have a particularly important story to share about something that happened while we were apart, concerning my sister. I haven't seen her around much these last few days, but I had thought that it was just because I had been focused on work, and my sister prefers to keep away from that area of our lives.

But, now that I know something happened with the girl she hasn't stopped talking about for weeks, I worry that her absence is more than just avoiding anything mafia related.

I reach the top of the stairs, and the hallway is dim.

I walk to my sister's room and knock lightly, waiting for a response.

There is none at first, so I call out "Tati? It's Yulian."

Then, finally: "come in." It's a bit muffled, and not just because it's through a door.

Pushing the door open, I immediately take in how dark the room is. All the lights are off, with the only light sources being the moon shining through her windows, and the phone held close to her face. She's curled beneath a heap of blankets on her bed, knees tucked up toward her chest, her back to the door. A soft shuffle of movement is all the acknowledgment I get.

It's not even late, barely brushing past nine, and she's not the type to turn in early. Not unless something's wrong.

I step inside and shut the door behind me.

"You okay?" I keep my voice soft and casual. If possible, I'd prefer she came to me than me to her, but I will if I have to.

A muffled, "Yeah," comes from somewhere under the covers, but it's unconvincing.

I hesitate a second, then cross the room and sit down on the edge of the mattress. The blankets shift as I do, but she still doesn't look at

me.

I exhale through my nose, eyes flicking to the worn edges of one of the stuffed animals she keeps tucked near her pillow. I suppose I'll go to her then. "Vaughn told me you ran into him and Jessie the other day."

Tati stiffens. The tension rolls off her in waves, even under the covers.

After a moment, she slowly peels the blankets back, revealing her face. It's puffy with red-rimmed eyes, cheeks streaked with dried tears, her lower lip raw like she's been biting it.

My chest tightens.

She blinks at me, glassy and embarrassed. "I didn't know," she says, voice thin and aching. "I didn't know they knew each other."

When Vaughn explained how confused and sad Tati looked when she saw Jessie and Vaughn together, I felt rage for her. How dare anyone make my sister sad?

Her eyes flicker away. She drags in a breath, shaky and uneven. "I thought... I thought she was just some normal girl. Just a girl who liked books and travelling and wasn't afraid to speak her mind around me in case my father killed her for it. I thought she was completely separate from our world, someone I was finally getting close to."

"She was safe," I finish for her.

Tati nods miserably. “And she was lying. The whole time.”

The thing is, if it were anyone else, I’d have killed them already. Personally put their head on a spike for daring to make my sister upset. But this girl is not just anyone. And while she may mean absolutely nothing to me, she does mean something to Vaughn.

I reach out and tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s not the end of the world.”

“It is to me.”

There’s no dramatic sob or flailing dramatics. Just a quiet, deadly kind of heartbreak that settles deep and festers.

“You can make other friends,” I offer, gently. “There are others out there who like the same things you do, who truly have nothing to do with our world.”

She shakes her head. “There aren’t any like Jess.”

That lands heavy. Her voice is weighted with finality, not defiant or dramatic, just honest.

I study her face. The hurt, the betrayal, the strange helpless grief curling in her expression.

And I wonder, just for a moment, if Jessie was more than a friend. If maybe Tati doesn’t even fully realize it herself.

I don’t ask.

Instead, I slide my arm around her shoulders and pull her into a slow, firm hug. Her head tips against me, the barest sound escaping her throat, something like a broken exhale.

“Then maybe you can work it out with her,” I murmur. “If you want her, then don’t let anyone in the fucking world stop you from having her. You are a Dimitriev, and my sister, and we always get what we want.”

Tati says nothing, but I feel her stiffen in my hold

I hold her a few moments longer, fingers brushing slow circles against her shoulder. When I finally ease back, she lets me, eyes distant but dry now.

“I have to finish a few things downstairs,” I say gently. “But I’ll check on you later, okay?”

She nods.

I rise and head for the door, glancing back once.

She’s curling back beneath the blankets again, quieter now. It doesn’t take her long to fall asleep.

-

The second my phone buzzes, a strange, unpleasant coldness slithers down my spine.

I glance at the screen, and there it is.

Father.

My stomach tightens instantly. It's almost impressive how quickly everything inside me knots. I don't answer right away. Just stare at the name, feeling the seconds stretch thin and sharp like wire.

I consider declining it, throwing the phone across the room and pretending I never saw it. But, unfortunately, I know better than to ignore a call from him.

If I used to avoid my father before I learnt the truth about the basement, I straight up try and pretend he doesn't exist now. Every thought of him sends rage boiling through me, and I worry that I won't be able to fully control myself when talking to him.

With a quiet exhale, I tap the screen and lift the phone to my ear.

"Hello."

"You're getting sloppy," my father says. Voice low, clipped, and venom laced. "Don't think I haven't noticed."

Sloppy, right. I grind my molars together. My hand clenches around the phone hard enough to ache. I want to snap back, something sharp and cutting, but I force myself to swallow it down. I don't say anything. Not yet.

“You’ve been having meetings for days, yet you’ve accomplished nothing.”

Lie. We formulated a plan that could improve trade profits by 7%.

“Father-“

He tuts. “Do not speak back to me, mutt. You haven’t even formally addressed your own men, yet. It’s a wonder you manage to keep their loyalty at all.”

I say nothing. My jaw is locked so tight my teeth hurt.

“You got quiet all of a sudden,” he says, voice curling with mockery. “Nothing to say for yourself?”

He *just* fucking told me not to speak back. Can I ever fucking win with this prick?

I want to say a thousand things. That I have achieved a whole lot, and yes, I haven’t quite finished, but that’s because I care about quality over quantity. I am not some reckless child fumbling his responsibilities.

But I also know he’s baiting me. He always is.

So, I stay quiet.

There's a moment of silence. Then, he sighs casually, and the sudden flip in tone almost sends me spiralling.

"This little *war* of yours with Morozov."

My stomach flips.

"It's cooled off," he continues. "Rather suddenly."

I blink, startled despite myself. "How do you know that?" I ask before I can stop the words from spilling out.

Wrong move.

"You think I'm not watching?" he snaps. "You think I don't have eyes? Don't insult me."

I don't answer. My throat feels too tight anyway.

"What's going on between you and between you and him?" His voice is colder now. More dangerous. "And don't give me some bullshit answer. I want the truth. Is there something I should know?"

My body feels locked in place. My father *cannot* know about Vaughn and I, under any circumstances. The very thought of it sends my skin crawling. Not to mention that he can pull my sister back to Chicago at any moment, and I can't have that. After finally getting the taste for

freedom, I don't think Tati could handle it.

I force myself to sound even. Bored, even. "No," I say. "Nothing's going on. We've both been busy with other things, that's all."

A pause.

"You're lying."

I feel it like a blow to the gut, even though his tone is calm.

"I'm not," I say. "We haven't been bothering with it lately. We've had more important things to deal with."

Another pause.

"You've always been a talented liar, Yulian," he says. "But don't forget who taught you."

That hits in a way I hate. I hate the way he knows exactly what to say to crawl under my skin. I hate that it works.

"I'm not lying," I repeat, more firm, and a hint of anger in my voice. "There's nothing to worry about. Do not accuse me of it again," I hiss.

That will piss him off, but it will also distract him from Vaughn, and it's worth the trade.

He doesn't speak for a moment. And I know that's worse than anything he could say.

Then: "Fine. But don't get comfortable. Don't make the mistake of thinking I've gone blind just because you've gotten *soft*."

My blood runs hot. "I haven't-" Click. The line goes dead.

Confusion settles within me at how easily he gave in. I was sure that biting back at him would just provoke him into another argument. It usually does, but not this time. What am I missing?

I stare at the phone, his words ringing in my ears like sirens.

It doesn't surprise me that he has eyes here. In fact, I'd be more surprised if he didn't. But I hadn't realised just how close these eyes lay. I trust all of the people in my inner circle, of course. But there are others on the outskirts who I don't.

I drop the phone on the table, harder than I mean to. It rattles, skids across the surface.

Every part of me feels like it's buzzing with static. My hands shake slightly, even as I curl them into fists. I hate how easily he gets to me. I hate that I let him. I hate the pressure under my skin, the bile in my throat, the way my thoughts spiral with all the things I couldn't say.

Because if he knew... if he *really* knew what was going on with me and Vaughn...

No. I won't even let myself imagine what he'd do with that knowledge.

I pace the room twice, running a hand through my hair, trying to suppress the angry, helpless frustration crawling under my skin. I don't want to feel this way. I don't want *him* in my head.

But he is. And I don't know how to get him out. I don't even sit down. I just stand there, staring at the silent phone, heart pounding like I've run a mile, jaw clenched so tight I feel it in my temples.

I wonder, briefly, darkly, what it would be like to never have to answer his calls again. What it would take, what I would do, to make that happen.

But that isn't an option. Not yet at least.

-

Vaughn

-

I'm stretched out on the couch at the cottage, scrolling lazily through Instagram, my legs slung over the armrest, the soft hum of the afternoon wrapping around me like a blanket. I see that I've been tagged in a post by Maya, and when I click on it, I see that it's a photo of her and I on facetime with Gareth and Lidya.

Gareth was at Kayden's when we called, hence why he wasn't with Maya and I. It was taken a few nights ago, when the girls insisted we

have a catch up.

I'm about to click on Gareth's username, where it's also been tagged on the photo, to see if he's posted anything recently, when I hear the door creak open behind me.

I don't even need to look up. My skin tingles with excitement, as I already know who it is.

I toss my phone aside and push to my feet with a grin already tugging at my mouth. He's not supposed to be here for a few more hours, but I'm not exactly complaining.

"You just couldn't wait to see me, huh?" I say, crossing the room in three easy steps and pressing a kiss to his mouth.

He kisses me back, but it doesn't feel right. Something about him feels off. Like he's full of pressure.

I pause. Blink.

His posture is stiff, his eyes distant. His jaw's locked tight like he's trying not to grind his teeth. One look, and every nerve in my body rings with tension.

I pull back slightly. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," he snaps, stepping past me and shrugging off his coat.

My smile flickers, falters. “Right. Of course you are.” I watch him for a beat. His movements are sharp, jerky. He doesn’t meet my eye.

I sigh quietly through my nose and decide to pivot. “Want me to cook something? I’ve got ingredients for that pasta you liked last time-”

“No.”

Just that. Flat. Final.

I tilt my head, getting a little frustrated by his shortness with me. If he’s pissed off, he can talk to me about it like a man, not mope around. “Okay. What do you want, then?”

“I don’t know, Vaughn. Can you not-” His voice rises, strained. “Can you not pry for five fucking minutes?”

I stare at him. My chest tightens, and the corner of my mouth twitches up, not in amusement, but in disbelief. “Pry? Jesus. Sorry for giving a shit.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“And I didn’t ask you to show up here pissed off and act like it’s my fault.”

He turns sharply, his expression stormy. “I never said it was-”

“No, you didn’t,” I cut in, my voice sharp. “But you show up like this, practically vibrating with anger, and then snap at me like I’m the one who put you in this mood. You won’t tell me what’s wrong, you won’t talk, and now I’m the bad guy for asking?”

He flinches. It’s quick, barely visible, but I see it. It makes me feel like I kicked something fragile by mistake, and that only pisses me off more.

“If you’re upset about something else,” I say, quieter now, tighter, “don’t take it out on me. I didn’t do anything wrong. Do not strop around like some child. You are better than that and I won’t tolerate it. Tell me what is really going on, or I will make you.”

The silence that follows is brittle. I feel the familiar burning sensation buzzing under my skin, and I fight hard to keep it down. Since saying it out loud to Yulian, I’ve been working hard to get myself more under control, and I refuse to let Yulian himself, who has been so key in helping me get to this point, be the reason that I crash again.

Yulian looks away first. His fingers twitch at his sides. Then he exhales, long and slow, like he’s deflating. “I’m sorry,” he mutters, his voice hoarse. “I just- I had a call with my dad before I came.”

Everything in me freezes.

“Oh.”

Yeah. Just that one word. Because what the hell else am I supposed to say?

I cross my arms. The anger's not gone, exactly, but it's changed. Simmering now instead of boiling.

"Was it bad?" I ask, finally.

He doesn't look at me. "Yeah."

And I'm supposed to just let that be enough. He drops it there, like the conversation's over, like I'm meant to nod and move on.

But no, not this time.

"You could've just told me that when I asked," I say, more tired than angry now. "You know I don't read minds."

"I know," he says, eyes still on the floor.

"I've been trying so hard to be honest with you. To be open. I've been trying, Yulian." My throat feels tight. "It'd be nice if you tried, too."

He looks up then, and his expression softens with something like guilt. "You're right," he says. His jaw is tense as he says it, as if it physically pains him to do so, but the effort is there. "You're right. I just… I didn't want to talk about it. And I didn't want to be alone. So I came here. But I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"No, you shouldn't have," I agree. But I don't move away. I don't

throw up my walls. I want to. For a second, I want to so badly it almost hurts.

But then I see how tired he looks. How fucking fragile.

So, I sigh, step forward, and wrap my arms around his waist. “You’re allowed to be upset,” I say quietly, “but you can’t shut me out and expect me to just smile and take it.”

“I know.”

“I don’t like fighting with you.”

“Neither do I.”

He leans forward, just enough to press his forehead to mine. His exhale shudders between us.

“Come sit down,” I say, and I feel him relax, thinking he’s forgiven.

He’s not, I’ll punish the fuck out of him later for his disrespect toward me, but I realise that now isn’t the time for that.

Yulian melts as his weight settles against me, his head tucked just under my chin, and I wrap my arms around him tighter, fingers brushing lightly over the edge of his spine. I press a kiss to his hair. He smells like night air and expensive cologne and something sharp underneath it all.

I let out a quiet breath. “You never talk about him.”

Yulian doesn’t respond.

I smooth my hand down his back, slow and gentle. “Your father.”

He tenses.

“I know he hurt you,” I say. “You’ve said that. But… that’s all I know.”

“I don’t want to talk about him.”

“You always want to talk about me,” I murmur, not accusing, just honest. “You ask about my childhood. My thoughts. You want to know everything there is to know. Well… I want to know you too, Yulian. All of you. Even the dark, ugly parts. Even this.”

He shifts slightly but doesn’t pull away. He’s quiet for a long time. Then, with a gruff tone, “I don’t want to fucking trigger you again, Vaughn.”

“I don’t care,” I say, trying to keep my voice steady. “We’re partners in this. We handle this shit together, okay?”

More silence.

Then his breath catches, just once, and he says, voice hollow, “He murdered my mother.”

My entire body stills.

Yulian doesn’t look up. He stays pressed against me, but I feel the tremble in his chest like a tremor under skin. Not a tremble of sadness or grief, though, but rage and violence, like he is struggling to hold his fury back.

“It was a couple months before the basement,” he says, like he’s reciting a story he’s told no one but himself. “She was so kind, and so sweet. Tati reminds me of her so much. Both could have a serious temper when on their day.”

“But she got quieter, over the years. More timid and careful, as my father beat her defiance out of her. She lost her spark. Then I started noticing little things. She was packing bags. Mine and Tati’s. A few clothes, cash, essentials. She’d talk to me in hushed tones, always checking over her shoulder.”

I keep one hand on the back of his head, the other across his back. Holding him. Letting him speak.

“She said we were going away. Just us three. But I couldn’t tell anyone. Not even Tati, at first. She said it had to be a surprise for her. That was the only way it would work.”

He breathes in sharply. Shudders.

“Then one night… I heard it. My mum and father, yelling at each

other. I was upstairs. She always told me *no matter what*, if I ever heard anything… if I ever heard *her*, I had to hide. I wasn't allowed to come out. No matter how bad it sounded."

My throat aches.

"And I listened to her," he says, like he's confessing a crime. "I did what she said. I stayed in the closet in my room with my hands over my ears and my knees against my chest and I *stayed*. Even when I still heard her scream. Even when I wanted to run downstairs and throw myself between them."

He exhales again, ragged.

"I didn't go."

"You were just a child," I whisper. "She told you to hide. You did the right thing."

"I was fucking *scared*," he chokes out. "I didn't stay because I was brave. I stayed because I couldn't move. My legs wouldn't work. I sat in the dark like a *coward*."

"No," I say, instantly.

"Hours later, I crept downstairs. The whole house was silent. I thought maybe it was over. I thought-" He swallows, hard. "I found her in the kitchen. There was so much blood. She was gone. He just fucking left her there. Lying on the floor."

I press a hand to the back of his head and let my own eyes close, breathing as evenly and quietly as I can, pushing the inferno rising in my chest back down. I want to kill his father. Slowly. I want him to suffer in ways that aren't even *invented yet*. But mostly, I want to find a way to take this memory and burn it to ash, so Yulian never has to carry it again.

His hand grips my wrist tightly, liking he's using it to stay in place, and though it almost hurts as it's so tight, I don't stop him.

"I swore I would never feel that scared again," he murmurs. "Not ever. I became someone who wouldn't freeze. Who wouldn't hide. But it doesn't change what I did."

"You didn't *do* anything," I say firmly. "You were a child following his mother's instructions. She knew what kind of man he was. She told you to hide because she *wanted you to live*."

He's quiet. Listening. But I know it's not enough. So, I reach for the only thing I think might make it through that thick skull of his.

"If you had gone downstairs, and he killed you too, even by accident, what would have happened to Tati?"

That gets his attention. He lifts his head, eyes dark. "What?"

"In your family, the heir has to share your bloodline. If you weren't around to have kids, the duty would fall to Tati. She'd have to provide the next heir. And while just having a child might not be the end of the world for her, you know damn well your father wouldn't just let her walk away after that."

He flinches like I've struck him.

"She would be forced to stick around. To raise them. You told me she doesn't want to have children," I say firmly, "she wants freedom. She wants to be the cool aunt with a million nieces and nephews, remember?"

Yulian stares at me, wide-eyed.

"If you had died," I say, "she wouldn't have had a choice. She would have been forced to carry the burden meant for you. All because you went down those stairs."

I can see the wrath in his eyes at just the thought of what could have happened to his sister.

I cup his face gently, guiding his gaze back to mine. "You did the right thing, Yulian. You stayed. You lived. You protected Tati by surviving. Your mother *knew* what she was doing when she told you to hide. She trusted you to listen. And you did."

He nods once. I lean down close to his face.

"Your mother is in the stars now," I murmur. "Remember?"

I watch as his mouth drops a little and his eyes go wide.

He blinks once. "You remember that?"

“You told me in the basement,” I say. “You asked if the stars ever look back at us, as your father told you your mother was up there. You wondered if she was watching over you.”

For a moment, he just stares at me. Like he can’t believe I would remember such a small detail about him. But it’s not small, not to me. I can hear the softness in his voice when he talks about his mother, I can hear how much he loves and misses her, so different to his usual unseriousness.

“You’d be surprised what I remember about you,” I say, letting the edge of my mouth tug up.

He leans back, stretching his arms behind his head like he needs to regain some distance from how that made him feel. “No, I wouldn’t. I know you’re obsessed with me.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “Shut the fuck up.”

“It’s not an insult. You have excellent taste.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“You’re enamoured.”

I laugh again, the sound surprising me by how easy it comes out. How light.

Yulian breathes out. “My mum always loved the stars. My dad got her a telescope when I was very young. He used to do that a lot; buy her things after he’d almost beat her to death. She knew he didn’t actually care, that he was only doing it to keep her in place, but she had nowhere to go. She used to let Tati and I stargaze with her. It wasn’t often we had clear skies, in Chicago, as it was mostly cloudy, but there were the rare nights you could see the whole sky.”

He avoids eye contact with me, like it’s a struggle to let out such emotions, but he tries anyway and continues. “After she was gone, one night, when my father was very drunk, he told me she was in the stars. I think he felt bad for taking my mother away.”

He sighs. “But that was a long time ago. He only got crueller and meaner over the years. And now, I don’t think there’s any human left in him.”

The silence that follows is one of those rare ones that doesn’t feel like it's cutting off air. It breathes with us. And for a moment, it’s just us.

“Is there anything you want to tell me?” I ask. “While we’re here?”

It’s not often I get him in such a mood where he is willing to open up, and I want to seize it as much as I can.

Yulian looks conflicted and unsure. Though, I don’t think it’s because he is unsure if there is anything else to tell, but rather that he is unsure if he should tell me more about something in particular.

“You don’t have to,” I say. “But I want to know.”

Another pause. Then, finally, he speaks. “My father found out I knew about my mother’s escape plan.”

The air shifts. I sit up straighter, sensing the way his voice thins out. Where when he talked about his mother, his voice turned angry, now it just sounds… sad.

“I don’t know how he knew, but it doesn’t matter.” His voice is clipped. “He made me pay for it.”

I don’t speak. I just wait.

Yulian breathes out through his nose. “I had a pet snake. It was a California King. I named him Slinky, because that was my favourite toy at the time. My mum gave him to me for my third birthday. He was white and black. Tiny, at first. But he grew up with me.”

There’s something about the way he says that, *grew up with me*, that makes something inside me ache.

“He was mine,” Yulian continues. “He was safe. He liked to curl around my wrist and fall asleep there. Snakes aren’t capable of feeling love or affection, they don’t have the brain for it, but he always seemed to know when I was upset. He’d nudge me until I picked him up.”

My throat tightens. “What did your father do?”

Yulian’s voice goes cold. “He made me watch. Said it was to teach me not to keep secrets. Said that it was my consequence for choosing my mother over him, and I was never to betray him again.”

I flinch.

“I begged,” he says flatly. “Didn’t matter.”

A horrible, icy silence drapes over the table. “My tattoo,” he says, gesturing to his torso, though it’s covered with his shirt, “it’s based on him.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “He must have meant a lot to you.”

Yulian nods his head.

“Did you ever think about getting another?” I ask.

“No, not while I was still in Chicago, I didn’t want to risk it. But I would like to, one day.”

I smile at him. “I’m sure it will be treated like royalty.”

He nods. “Only the best.”

I reach forward, pulling him back toward me. My hand slides up his shirt to where I know the snake tattoo is, I can tell by the outline of his scars. My fingers trail it.

“Yulian,” I say, not even thinking. “You didn’t deserve that.”

His hand comes to rest over mine, through the shirt. “Thank you.”

-

It’s been a few days since Yulian opened up to me about his mother, and things between us are better than ever. Right now, I can smell the brownies he’s making for his sister in the kitchen to cheer her up wafting through the cottage, into our bedroom, where I’m scrolling through my phone.

My phone starts buzzing in my hands as I see ‘Dad’ pop up on the screen, and I click answer without hesitation.

“Hey.”

“Vaughn.” His voice is deep, steady and relaxed. “You got a minute?”

“Sure. Everything okay?”

There’s a brief pause before he says, “I just got off a call with Conall O’Sullivan, who recently took over as Boss in the Dublin branch of the Irish mafia. It went well.”

I lean against the counter, already feeling my muscles tense with attention. “That’s good. They open to talks now?”

“They are. Dublin’s been struggling these last few years, hard. Poor

leadership over there, or at least until O'Sullivan took over, not enough support. They're desperate to hold onto relevance, and they're finally willing to look outside themselves. It's a good time to move."

I nod, even though he can't see it. "So, what's the plan?"

"I want you to go there. Dublin. Meet with their upper circle. Evaluate them. Get a sense of what we're dealing with, who's loyal, who's a problem, how salvageable it really is."

"You want me to lead the talks?"

"I trust you," he says plainly. No hesitation. "If you see potential there, make a formal offer. If not, walk away. I want your judgment on this, and I trust it."

Something sharp and warm cuts through me. My dad has never been one to sugarcoat his love for me, nor how proud he is and how much he trusts me, but those have only ever been words. Now, he is putting that trust in action. And I'm going to prove he's right to do so.

I exhale and nod again. "I'll do it. I won't let you down."

"I know you won't," he says, and it's not a throwaway reassurance. "Your first meeting is in a few days; I'll send over the details. I should think you'll only be there a few days but take as long or little as you need. It's up to you if you want to go alone or take one of the boys with you. I'm putting this entirely in your hands, Vaughn."

"Okay," I say. "I'll have a think about it and get back to you."

“I’d say ‘make me proud’,” my dad says, “but you already do.”

I grip the bedsheets beside me, anchoring myself in the quiet swell of something close to pride. “Thanks, dad.”

We hang up, and I just sit here for a second, staring at my phone as a wide smile takes over my face.

Dublin. I’m going to Dublin. It’s not the first time I’ve represented our family since I came here, but it is in such an important context.

This is what I’ve been preparing for. What I’ve been excited for, my entire life. I haven’t forgot the doubts that some members of our organization have shown about me since I returned from the kidnapping, and now, I get to show them just how wrong they are about me.

But, then, I feel a slight pang in my chest. I’m going to be leaving for a few days.

More specifically, leaving him.

Yulian.

The thought creeps in slowly, quietly, like fog seeping under a door. I’ll only be gone a few days, maybe a week at most, and yet the second I imagine boarding that plane without him, a pang of something sharp and sudden cuts through me.

I've spent years trying to push him away, to keep him at arm's length, and now the idea of being apart from him for a handful of nights unsettles something in me I don't know how to name. It feels ridiculous, only a few *days* apart and we've only been seeing each other for a couple months.

Yet, I feel a physical ache inside me when I think about the time we will have to be apart. I'll be busy in meetings, too, so I won't even have much time to text him.

And I haven't even left yet.

I don't know what the fuck that means. Only that I'm on my feet a moment later, pushing through the hallway until I reach the kitchen.

His back is to me, and he's just beginning to pour the mixture into the pan, ready to go into the oven. It smells divine, and it hasn't even started cooking yet. I suppose both Tati and Yulian inherited the gene for brilliant baker.

"I'm going to Dublin," I say, voice clipped.

Yulian puts down the bowl and turns to me. He didn't flinch at my sudden appearance, despite him having his back to me. He probably sensed when I came in, to be fair. I know I would. His eyes narrow slightly, his brow lifting. "When?"

"Two days."

He wipes his hands over the apron. It says, ‘kiss the cook’, he got it for me when I started cooking for him, and likes to insist that the food won’t come out right if we don’t listen to the apron’s rules. Jokes on him, I love it when he abides by the apron’s rules. “Work?”

“Yeah. My father wants me to meet with the new Boss in the Dublin sector. They’ve reached out and he wants me to see if they’re worth the hassle.”

He nods slowly, gaze drifting somewhere past me. “How long?”

“Few days, probably.”

There’s a beat of silence. And in it, I see the exact moment he swallows the reaction that flickers across his face. It’s a flicker, no more than that, but I catch it. The flicker of something like disappointment.

And fuck, for some reason, it hits me harder than it should.

He says nothing, just nods again. “Okay.”

I hate his response, but I know that if there is anything he won’t push back on me about, it’s this. We both understand the importance of building relations like this, of proving ourselves to the rest of our organization during a time where it’s expected we start taking on bigger responsibilities.

We might have screwed one another over in the past when it came to business, but not anymore. We’re too far gone with one another to ever even consider it now.

I take a breath. Something pushes at my throat.

"Come with me," I blurt out. I don't know where it comes from, or if I'm even thinking straight. I crave control, and by nature hate spontaneity, yet when it comes to Yulian, I have no restraint on myself.

Yulian blinks. "What?"

I step forward, unsure if I'm even going to repeat it until I do. "Come with me. To Ireland."

He stares. "You want me to come with you?"

"Yes." My voice is firmer now, more certain. "I do."

There's a long pause. He shifts on the couch, sitting up straighter. "Are you sure?"

Am I?

I hesitate. Not because I don't want him there. I do. But that's exactly the problem. I want him there, badly. And that's dangerous. But then again… maybe I'm tired of pretending it isn't. Maybe I want to spend a few days not pretending. We'd have to be sneaky, sure, but as long as we stick clear of the area of Dublin the gangsters are, no one will ever know.

We wouldn't have to move in fear of being seen by someone we might know. We'd be free, just for a few days.

"I'm sure," I say. "I'll be in meetings a lot of the time, but... it wouldn't be hard to stay out of sight. We'll book a simple hotel room, on the outskirts of Dublin. But we can… be around each other."

His mouth twitches like he's trying not to smile. "You're not worried about being caught?"

"Maybe that's a risk I'm willing to take," I mutter.

He laughs, soft and warm, and the sound slides under my skin.

"I'll come," he says.

My shoulders ease. I hadn't realized how tense they were until that moment. "Good," I say.

"Good," he repeats.

It shocks me, in this moment, just how much I'm changing. The Vaughn of just last year would never consider doing something like this. But the Vaughn of last year would never have admitted the way he feels for Yulian Dimitriev like I can.

Being around him is changing me, and for the better, I think.

-

Yulian

-

The zipper scrapes along the teeth of the duffle bag as I have to fight to make it close. So, I might be a bit of an over packer. Sue me. Most of the clothes have been thrown in there quickly, so I suppose my struggle is my own fault for not taking the time to properly fold up my clothes.

But I'm just so damn *excited*.

Vaughn asked me to go with him to Ireland. I'd be lying if I said that didn't truly shock me, but I obviously said yes. I've already told Tati, who just wiggled her eyebrows at me and told me to have fun.

The wardrobe door creaks behind me. I don't turn.

"You going somewhere?" comes Mikhail's voice, sounding unsure, taking in the sight of my packed bag. I've yet to inform him or Annie of my little trip.

I exhale through my nose and glance over my shoulder. He stands at the threshold of my room, arms folded.

"Yeah," I said simply.

"Where to?"

I hesitate.

For a moment, I consider straight lying to him, but I know that wouldn't work. Because I still have the tracker in my phone that only Mikhail has access to. Of course, there's a chance he could just take me at my word and not bother to check the tracker. But I know him too well, he's paranoid, and takes my safety very seriously.

I'm grateful for it, of course, but since I've started seeing Vaughn, it has become a bit of a problem.

So, I settle for a sliver of truth.

"I heard some chatter about the Irish making moves. Could be nothing. But I want to see what's going on firsthand." I click the cologne bottle shut as I grab it from my shelf and slip it into the side-pocket of my bag.

Mikhail doesn't say anything for a moment, clearly thinking about my answer.

Then: "You want me to pack light or full gear?"

"No." The word escapes sharper than I mean it to and I turn fully to face him. "I'm going alone."

His brow lifts, just barely, but I see it.

"You don't go anywhere alone."

I hold his gaze. "This time, I do."

"Boss-"

"The fewer people, the less attention. You know that."

"It could be dangerous," Mikhail says, voice flat. "And the Irish don't exactly roll out red carpets for foreign eyes. Especially not ones who don't announce themselves beforehand."

I smirk. "I'll wear a hoodie and hat. Perfect disguise."

He doesn't laugh.

"Mikhail." I step closer. "It's three or four days. I'll check in. You'll know where I am."

He still looks uncertain, suspicious even. And to be fair to him, he has every right to be.

If he found out that I was going with Vaughn, not to spy, not working, not gathering intel, but simply to spend time with someone he definitely still views as an enemy, he'd lose his mind.

He'd call me reckless, and he might be right. I just have to hope that he doesn't catch wind of Vaughn being in Ireland at the same time, or else he would definitely figure me out. Vaughn said the trip was being

kept on the down low, though, so I should be in the clear.

"Alright," Mikhail says slowly. "But you check in multiple times a day."

"Of course."

His gaze narrows, but he nods. I sling the strap of the bag over my shoulder. "One more thing," I say.

He looks at me expectantly.

"Let's keep this little trip from my father, yeah?"

Mikhail nods his head. "Sure thing, Boss."

-

The airport is quiet when I arrive, though it is still quite early. I've worn dark glasses, a baseball cap pulled low, and a bomber jacket with the collar raised. Not exactly invisible, but enough to draw eyes away from my face. It would probably raise some red flags going through security, but I don't bother, just heading straight onto the tarmac.

Benefits of such a small airport.

The jet is already idling on the tarmac when I step out of the car. The stairs clank under my boots as I climb up. I duck inside-

-and there he is.

Vaughn.

Sitting on one of the leather sofas, wearing a hoodie and sweats on what's a pretty cold morning for the end of April. He looks at me as I board.

I set my bag down and quirk a brow. "Well, well. Private jet, expensive champagne, secret passengers, only thing missing is a bad decision or two."

Vaughn looks up at me, slow and unreadable, then he simply says, "Hi."

I snort, walking toward him as he stands up. I kiss him roughly, and I feel a twitch in my underwear. "You know…" I whisper, "I've always wanted to join the mile high club."

Vaughn laughs breathlessly in my ear. "Well, lucky for us, I wanted to reduce the risk for you being caught with me as much as I can, so it's only you, me and the pilot on this flight."

Well, fuck. I was sort of joking about joining the mile high club, but if we have the plane to ourselves…

"In that case, let's hope the pilot's headphones are soundproof."

Rather than replying, Vaughn simply pulls me into another deep kiss, as his hand slides into my underwear.

Chapter End Notes

hope you enjoyed.
im so so so excited for the next chapter. it is going to be the longest chap by far (and then after chaps will start being shorter, i swear). it is also without a doubt my favourite chap in the fic. be prepared for so much relationship development and cute moments (seriously, take them in, because it'll be the last you get for a while...) i considered seperating the chapter into two, by i decided against it in the ends, so its going to be a very very long chapter.
im going to try very hard to get it uploaded tomorrow as i have work on sunday and if i dont it probably wont go up until monday, but it is a veryyyy long chap. but im hoping that because im so excited to finally write it, it should come pretty easily to me. anyway, i hope you guys are as excited for it as me.
as usual, my tumblr is lucsf19 if you want extra info/ideas etc about the fic, or you have any questions and would rather ask them anonymously or privately (my dms on there are always open and i usually respond pretty quick.)
thank you for all the support <3

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Notes

> hi! i know i said i would make the ireland trip one chapter, but i decided to split it into two as it is obviously very very long. but the next chapter is already finished and will be uploaded right after this one.
> i hope you enjoy, a lot of research went into making this haha.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAY ONE

Vaughn

-

By the time we land, I'm pretty drained. It was a very rigorous hour to Dublin. The taxi we took to the hotel pulls up after around a thirty-minute drive. It's on the outskirts of Dublin, quite average, for a hotel. Usually, we'd go for something a little classier, but what with wanting to keep on the down low, I figured this would be okay for only a few days.

I glance out the tinted window as the driver rounds to open the boot and help us get our bags out. The hotel is only a few stories high, surrounded by lots of stone and grassy areas. It doesn't take us long to get checked in and head up to our room.

I'm meeting O'Sullivan and his two sons for lunch, where we will get a start on negotiations and what not. I haven't got long until then, unfortunately. As soon as we enter the room, Yulian collapses on the bed and stretches like he hasn't moved in hours.

"Christ," he mutters, rubbing the back of his neck. "Pretty sure you put me in positions I didn't even know I was capable of." I grin at the

reminder of how we spent our flight. “Why did I let you top?” Yulian complains.

I chuckle. “Because you don’t have to meet with the Irish Boss and hopefully future partner for a meal just a couple hours later. Do you know how awkward it’d be if I spent the entire lunch struggling to sit still because my ass hurts?”

Yulian laughs loudly. “Touche.”

Checking my wrist, I say “only a few minutes before I have to head out.” I’m around a thirty-to-forty-minute drive from where we’re meeting, and I don’t want to be late.

Yulian wiggles his eyebrows at me. “So, no time for round two?”

Rolling my eyes I say, “pretty sure we already had round two. And three… and four…”

“Okay, I get it. Guess we’ll just have to have five when you get back then.”

Ignoring him, I ask “so what are you going to do today? I’ll probably be gone most of the day, so you’ll be alone until the evening.”

He cracks one eye open. “Mind if I go explore?”

I pause, halfway to the bathroom. “Alone?”

“You expecting me to take a chaperone?” he shoots back with a half-smirk. “I’ll be fine. It’s a city, not a battlefield.”

I don’t like the idea of him wandering around alone, not in a foreign place where I’m not very close. But Yulian’s not an idiot, and I can’t exactly keep him leashed. I settle on a warning.

“Try to avoid speaking to anyone or letting anyone see your face.”

He gives a lazy salute. “I’ll behave.”

I stare at him a beat longer, then continue into the bathroom to quickly check my hair in the mirror. Perfect. “Keep your phone on,” I call.

“Always do.”

I stride toward him and grip him by the chin. “I mean it, Zmejka,” I whisper into his mouth, before laying a claiming kiss on him.

He’s grinning when I pull back. “So do I, Mishka.”

As I head toward the door, his voice follows me. “Try not to make enemies before dinner, Vaughn.”

I don’t bother answering. If the Dublin crew is half as desperate as my father suspects, they’ll be too busy trying to impress me to even risk

stepping out of line.

-

The place they chose for the meeting isn't particularly flashy. Tucked behind a butcher's shop on a quiet Dublin street, it's the kind of location you'd miss if you didn't know it was there. Which, of course, is the point.

The air is damp as I step out of the car, and the faint smell of blood and meat clings to the alley. It's not necessarily the nicest part of town. I adjust my coat, glance once at the driver, a lackey they sent to pick me up, probably in an attempt to start off polite, and then push open the steel door at the back. Inside, it's warmer. Dimly lit. Smells of tobacco and whiskey, with a hint of aged wood.

Three men are waiting in the room. One stands. He's older, built well for a man his age and greying at the temples. A set of glasses sits on his nose, and I'm immediately reminded of the reason my own father chooses to wear glasses despite not needing them.

He steps forward first.

"Vaughn Morozov." His voice is rough, and his accent thick. "Welcome to Dublin."

I offer him my hand. "I appreciate the invitation, Mr O'Sullivan."

"Call me Conall," he says. "This is Padraig, and Cian." He nods to the others. Padraig, who I know is the older son and heir, stands tall and thick, a glower on his face as he appears to size me up. He is

positioned slightly in front of his younger brother, Cian, who is just as tall, but on the leaner side. His expression is a little more open, with a casual smile on his lips. Though, he does sort of have crazy eyes.

I quickly tell him to call me Vaughn, if we are to be on first name basis. Then, we all shake hands, and everyone is observing one another, and we all know it.

Conall gestures to a table in the centre of the room. It's wooden, scuffed, but solid. Several glasses sit on the table, one in front of each chair, with a large bottle of whiskey and vodka in the middle. We each take our seats.

Conall gestures to the two bottles on the table. "We brought our own finest whiskey, as us Irish love, but I know you Russians are partial to your vodka, so I thought I'd give you the option. Choose whichever you like, we do not take offense."

I debate it internally, which one to choose. It might seem simple, just choosing which drink I'd prefer. But, it's also a sign of where I stand, and how open I am to them. Conall waits silently for me to make my choice. I don't doubt him when he says he wouldn't take offense, but I do think it will solidify his perception of me.

"I'll take the whiskey, thank you," I finally say. A grin spreads across Conall's face and he nods, grabbing the bottle and pouring into mine, his and his son's glass.

I don't take a sip immediately. Rather, I wait until I see Conall do so first. He knows what I'm doing, though, and doesn't hesitate to take a sip as soon as it's poured. I nod at him subtly, as we both recognise what I've done, before I too take a sip.

It's good, I'll give them that.

After that, he doesn't waste any time.

"So," Conall starts, leaning back. "The great New York Bratva decides to extend a hand. Can't say I expected that in my lifetime."

I meet his gaze evenly. "We don't extend hands unless we see potential. My father doesn't believe in pointless gestures. Besides, it was you who reached out first, was it not?"

Cian chuckles under his breath. "Morozov Senior. Now there's a man." He arches his brows at me, before his brother not-so-subtly elbows him in the ribs.

"Careful," Padraig says, glaring at Cian. "You'll sound like a fanboy."

Conall waves them off and looks at me again. "You're right. We did reach out first. It's not a secret that we've been struggling for a while. And I'm not a man stubborn enough to let his ship sink out of proudness. So, let's talk expectations."

I nod. "Let's."

Conall leans forward again. "We're not idiots. We know we've slipped. The Dublin branch hasn't been what it was for several decades now. That was before my time-"

Cian giggles under his breath and I hear him whisper something to his

brother about if anything was ever before their father's time, only for him to be elbowed once again.

"-but I won't pretend things haven't soured since then. We've lost territory. Loyalty's scattered. We've got a few younger crews trying to break off. What we need is structure and stability."

"And resources," I say.

Conall inclines his head. "That too."

I swirl the whiskey in my glass. "You know we're not in the business of rescuing dead names. This isn't charity. If we back you, if we bring Dublin under the Bratva's umbrella, that will likely mean a full integration. Shared profits, shared operations. You play by our standards. That's not something we offer lightly."

"No offense," Padraig says, tone mild, "but we're not too keen on becoming someone's pet project. We're still Irish Mafia. Not some extension of your empire."

I set the glass down. "Then we're wasting time."

Conall lifts a hand. "He's testing lines. Don't take it to heart."

I don't. But I let silence stretch between us until it's tight enough to snap.

"I'm not here to babysit failing operations," I say finally. "You need to

convince me that Dublin is still worth investing in. That you still have power worth backing. Right now, all I see is a name with no teeth."

Conall doesn't flinch. He respects directness, I can tell. "That's why we wanted you to come. So you can see it for yourself. We've got boys still loyal. We've got routes still running. Guns. Smuggling. Protection, on the docks and inland. You'll see it. We'll take you through it, piece by piece."

"Good," I say. "Because right now, this is just talk."

He nods. "Talk is where it starts, though."

Padraig speaks again. "Let's say we do this. What does the alliance look like?"

I lean back. "There are options. Joint operations. We send a few of our people to observe yours. You send one or two of your own to train in New York, get a sense of how we run things."

Conall nods his head.

"Or we go down a different route. One more about creating long-lasting familial ties, truly connecting our families. Permanently."

I shift my attention toward his sons, specifically Padraig, the future Pakhan. While I hate the idea of offering any member of my own family up as a sacrificial mule, Lidya *is* only a few years younger than Padraig. It wouldn't be the first time the mafia made alliances through marriage.

To his credit, despite my suggestion of marriage, Padraig doesn't look off-kilter in the slightest. I suppose they likely were expecting something like this.

"And who from your family would you propose?" Padraig asks.

I sigh. "I can't say for sure right now. But my cousin Lidya is my age. Though, I will make it extremely clear right now, if marriage was the route we go down, then it will only be of her completely free choice. My cousin is dear to me, and if she says no, then that is final."

Padraig doesn't flinch, though there is a gleam of something unrecognisable in his eyes. "Understood."

Silence again.

Then Conall tips back his glass and downs the whiskey.

"I'll be honest with you, Vaughn. We didn't come to this easy. Asking for help from a bigger power feels like failure. But it's not just about pride anymore, it's about survival. And I'm not interested in watching this branch rot while we sit around pretending we're still kings."

I nod. "Good. Pride won't get you far in this world."

"Then you'll fit in well here," Cian says with a short laugh, sitting back against his chair.

I take another sip of my drink, as Conell pours himself another glass.

I lean forward slightly. “I didn’t come to fit in.”

“No,” Padraig agrees after a beat. “You came to expand.”

Breathing out lowly, I lean back, taking them all in. “That’s true, but it’s not exactly unsurprising. Though, I do question your commitment to helping us with that when we weren’t even your first choice.”

The three sat opposite me freeze. It’s something I learned only this morning, from my father, as I was sitting on the plane waiting for Yulian. They had initially approached a branch of the Italians first, one that we aren’t very familiar with. For a reason we aren’t sure of, it fell through, and they decided to come to us, instead.

Conall links his hands on the table, making eye contact. “Vaughn… I hope you understand, we in no way think of you as a second choice. We went to the Italians first, yes, because it seemed more practical. They’re a lot closer than you are.”

That is a fair point, I can admit.

“And it did fall through, and so we turned elsewhere, to you. Perhaps it was wrong not to mention it, I admit, but I simply feared that you would see another’s rejection of us and take the same path without consideration.”

I observe him closely. I don’t see a lie on his face, but men like him are always great liars.

“And why exactly did it fall through?” I ask.

Finally, I see a flicker of hesitation on Conall’s face. It’s quick, but I immediately track and retain it. It’s enough for me to understand some of his other tells, and I’m sure, now, that he was telling the truth before. Though, I’m not sure, due to his hesitation, that whatever is about to come out of his mouth is also going to be truth.

“It was… a difference of opinion,” Conall finally says, and I know he’s at the very least leaving some of the story out. “Our views didn’t align, and we knew they weren’t the right fit for us.”

Just as I’m about to call him out for lying, tell him that I’m not interested in doing business with liars, and walk away, Cian speaks up.

“That’s not what happened,” he says. His father’s eyes snap to him, anger clouding them.

“Cian-“ Padraig tries to warn, but Cian has none of it.

“One of the members of their inner circle said they’d only do business if dad let him sleep with our mum. He’s rather possessive over her, so it was a pretty definitive no. And if that is something you think we should’ve allowed, then you can get the fuck out.”

I can still see the frustration on Conall and Padraig’s faces, but they don’t say anything more, waiting for my answer. While they clearly may not like how he went about it, they do agree with Cian’s assessment.

“And what did you do to the man?” I ask, “the one who asked to sleep with your wife.” I look Conell straight in the eyes.

He looks straight back at me as he says, “I put him in the ground.”

I remain quiet for a few moments. Though, it’s simply because I want them to stew, to be on the edge of their seat. In reality, I know my next move as soon as he said he killed a man for insulting his wife, even if it meant losing the only thing that could save his organization.

“Do not lie to me again,” I state, “or I will do worse than just walk away from this. But you are forgiven for your misdeeds.

Conall nods in thanks, and I see the tension in his shoulders lessen, just slightly.

“I would also like to point out,” Padraig cuts in, “that you *were* my fathers first choice. He wanted to go to you, but it was only at my strong insistence that we went to the Italians first. It was a mistake on my part, not my fathers.”

I hum. “I appreciate that. Though it doesn’t change the fact that even if he wanted my organization as his first choice, he did not pick it in the end. Nonetheless, let us move past it.”

They all nod.

Conall sighs. “Let’s stop beating around the bush. We both know you have the upper hand here. I will not beg, nor admit weakness, but I

will accept that we are not at our strongest."

A pause falls between us. Then, in a slower, more measured tone, Conall says, "Tell me what you really want, Vaughn."

I stare at him, for a moment. "I want access through the port, clean routes, no interference. I want a point man here that my organization can trust. I want further access into Europe, and an easy stop point between us. I want quiet and I want stability. And in return, I give you a share of the profit. I give you loyalty and I give you protection if you need it."

"That's a lot of want," Cian mutters.

"And a lot of give," I counter.

Conall studies me. "You know, your father came through Dublin once, a long time ago. You would have been only a few years old at the time. I never spoke to him directly, I was much lower on the food chain at that time, but I remember the way he spoke, the way he held himself, especially when he spoke with our then Boss."

He looks me up and down. "You are a lot like him."

My jaw tightens. "My father is a brilliant man. I take that as a compliment."

"Good," Conell agrees, "it's meant to be."

Another silence settles, but this one is more thoughtful than tense. My reputation, or should I say, my family's reputation, precedes me, that much is clear. The Irishmen may be older, more rooted in the streets and alleys of Dublin than I will ever be, but they respect power when they see it. And as I sit here now, across from a man in a higher position than me, over twice my age, I know I carry it in my spine like iron.

I know exactly what he was doing when he said I was like my father. But it doesn't make me appreciate it any less. I could tell he was telling the truth when he said it.

My face shifts, and then I say, with certainty, "I don't waste loyalty when it's real. But I don't pretend something is loyalty when it's fear, or greed, or survival. I know the difference."

They all seem to exchange a silent look, one that comes with knowing each other their entire lives. Eventually, Padraig turns to me.

"We value your beliefs, and we hope that in the next few days, we can prove just how real our loyalty is. But we also value Dublin. We want what is best to make this place ours again, truly. We need to make sure you're worth taking seriously."

"And?" I ask.

Cian lifts his glass, toasting lazily toward me. "You're not full of shite. That's a start."

I pause for a second and see the tension on Padraig and Conall rise again. Then, I raise my own glass, chuckling. "I'll take that as a compliment."

Cian grins. “Don’t. You haven’t earned that yet.”

But the tone is lighter now, not exactly friendly, per se, but less bristling. I don’t let myself relax, but the shift is noted. This was a test, and we both passed the first round. The real negotiation will come later, once trust is laid brick by brick, once every man has learned exactly how far the other is willing to go.

We spent several more hours discussing, negotiating, suggesting ideas and more. By the end, I can tell we’re all tired. But a sense of comradery has grown, and I’m growing to like them more and more. Not that I’d ever admit it, of course.

Conell lets me know that they have other business to attend to tomorrow for most of the day, but they have time for a fairly quick brunch, just to check in. I agree, and he says he’ll send me the details of the place, as it will be different to this one.

We all stand, and I shake a hand with each of them, and then leave.

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Yulian

-

I let myself blend into the crowd, walking without a clear destination. With Vaughn gone all day, I knew I would have gone stir crazy just sat in that room all day, and I’ve never been to Ireland, let alone it’s capital. So here I am, killing time in a foreign city, trying not to look like a tourist, but also… kind of enjoying it.

I pull the cap down tighter over my head, and the hoodie sleeves lower. It's not a perfect disguise, someone who's really looking could probably recognize me, but it seems to work in the movies pretty well. Dublin's air is sharp with late-April breeze, and the streets are busy but not overwhelming. I'd be lying if I didn't admit I'm a little worried about rain, judging by the sky.

I've been in a few stores, though I've not bought anything, just having a look. I've walked through a few parks. Ireland is a very green place, especially compared to Chicago.

I continue my exploration through Dublin, until I turn a corner, and spot her.

A little girl, standing at the corner of a street, clutching a stuffed bear to her chest. She looks around, wide-eyed, blinking fast like she's trying not to cry. People pass her without a second glance. She has long, black hair and light eyes. If I squint, she looks just like my sister did when she was the girls age. And it sparks something within me.

I approach slowly. "Hey," I say, crouching to her level. "You okay?"

She jumps a little, startled, then hesitates before shaking her head. "I lost my ma."

Her voice is small, a little wobbly. Her Irish accent is strong, and combined with the fact she's a child, I'm worried I'm not going to understand everything she says.

"Do you know her phone number?" I ask.

She shakes her head again. “She was just here, and then she wasn’t.”

I scan the crowd. “Alright. What’s your name?”

“Aoife.”

“Well, Aoife,” I say, standing up, “my name is Yulian. Let’s go find your mum.”

She hesitates, then slips her hand into mine. It’s tiny. Trusting.

It’s probably not my smartest idea, walking around with what could already be a reported missing little girl, when I’m specifically supposed to be trying to not get caught, but I can’t just abandon her, and I don’t want to risk leaving her with someone else.

We start walking slowly along the street she pointed to, checking shops and glancing inside every café. I point at almost every grown woman I see, asking if that’s her mother, but Aoife says no every time. She’s gripping my fingers tighter now, but she’s stopped sniffling, and I think that’s something.

Finally, near a corner shop, a woman comes sprinting out, frantic eyes sweeping the street until they land on Aoife. Her face crumples with relief.

“Oh my god! Aoife!” she shouts, rushing forward. For a moment, she looks at me with suspicion, and I don’t blame her, what with my hoodie and hat still on. But then Aoife quickly introduces me as Yulian, the nice man who helped her, and the woman quickly relaxes.

The little girl lets go of me and runs straight into her mother's arms.

I step back.

"Thank you," the woman says, blinking tears, hugging her daughter like she's trying to fuse them together. "I just- I turned around for a second-"

"It's alright," I say, brushing it off. "It's no worries at all."

Now that I've done my yearly Samaritan act of saving a little girl, I really should get back to trying to keep myself hidden from everyone.

I disappear into the crowd again, weaving between people, observing the buildings around me, many of which are hundreds of years old.

I end up in a quieter part of the city, down one of those cobbled side streets that seem to go nowhere. There's a tiny restaurant tucked between two buildings, with only a sign saying, '*Nora and Barry's Burgers: Dublin's Delight'*. No flashing lights, just a faded green door and the smell of something… good. Warm.

I peer through the window. One man behind the counter looks up and grins through his thick beard.

"You coming in or just judging me from the glass?" he calls out, accent thick as hell.

I grin. “Coming in.”

The bell above the door jingles softly as I step inside.

What’s your name, son?” the man greets.

I debate it for a moment, before finally saying “Yulian.” Then I ask for his, and, unsurprisingly, it’s Barry.

Barry wipes his hands on a checkered cloth. “Yulian, huh? Not from around here.”

I smirk. “What gave it away?”

“Well, mostly the accent, but also…” he looks me up and down, eyeing my very expensive clothing, and I chuckle, nodding my head in understanding.

“Fair enough.”

From the doorway behind the counter, a woman emerges with a tray of steaming buns. Her hair’s silver at the roots but dyed a deep red, tied back with a scarf. She’s got flour on her cheek and eyes that flick over me with sharp interest.

“And who’s this?” she asks, voice soft but steady.

“This is Yulian,” Barry says. “He’s just been caught spying on my

burgers through the window."

I raise my hands in mock surrender. "Guilty as charged."

She chuckles, setting the tray down. "Well, I'm Nora. And if you're guilty, the only sentence we hand out here is making you try one."

"Tempting," I say, and I mean it, there's something about the smell here, that rich, charred meat mixed with warm bread, that makes my stomach twist with excitement. But I shake my head. "I can't stay. I've got someone waiting for me."

"What sort of someone?" Barry asks, eyebrow raised.

I smirk faintly. "Somewhere in between, depending on the day."

They both exchange a look, one of those wordless married-people exchanges that seems to last longer than it should.

"Well," Nora says, leaning against the counter, "you tell them you nearly missed dinner because you found a proper burger place. Not one of those chains."

Barry nods sagely. "Tell him we make everything fresh here. And if he doesn't bring you back, we'll be offended."

"I'll keep that in mind," I say honestly. "Really."

Nora smiles, eyes crinkling. “I hope you do. We like seeing new faces. You take care of yourself, Yulian.”

“You too,” I reply, already stepping back toward the door. “And… maybe I’ll see you both soon.”

The bell jingles again as I leave, the warm scent following me out into the cold.

-

When Vaughn walks back into the hotel room, he’s already shrugging off his jacket and lazily kicking off his shoes. I glance up from where I’m sprawled across the bed, flicking through channels on the old television on the wall opposite.

He throws the jacket onto the table and chucks his shoes in a random direction, and then groans like the day’s weight is finally catching up to him.

“Long day?” I ask, even though I already know the answer.

He shoots me a tired look and then flops down beside me, sinking into the mattress. “You could say that. I think it went well though. I’m meeting them for brunch again tomorrow.”

My eyes narrow. “And who is exactly is ‘them’, you never fully specified.”

“Conall-”

Conall? They're on a first name basis already?

"-and his sons, Padraig and Cian. They're around our age, a couple years older, perhaps."

I feel a spark of annoyance. He spent all day with other men, chatting and laughing and giving them his full attention, when his attention, his mind, his everything belongs to me. Just the very idea that he's going to have to do it again tomorrow, and the next day and probably the day after that too, sends another wave of frustration through me.

"Interesting," I finally say, though I know my tone is low. Vaughn side-eyes me, knowing exactly what's put me in such a mood. He can't exactly complain, though. He'd be the exact same if I just said I spent all day with someone he doesn't even know.

"Anyway," he sighs, letting his eyes fall shut. "I'm starving."

I don't answer right away. I'm too busy imagining him sitting at a table earlier, maybe leaning back in his chair, having a drink with two handsome men his age. I imagine that they're somwhere relatively public. They don't care if they're spotted entering or leaving together. It doesn't even cross their minds to have to hide.

I hesitate for a second before saying, "Then let's go out."

Vaughn cracks one eye open. "Out?"

It's a terrible idea, I know. But all I can picture is how easily he spent

the day with another mafia organization, while I can't even tell anyone that I'm here, with him.

"Yeah." I sit up a little. "There's this tiny place I found earlier. Kind of hidden, barely any signage. Food smelt incredible. No one would see us, I swear."

He doesn't respond right away. Instead, he looks at me like I've lost my mind. "You want to go *out, out*? As in, into the public? In a capital city where we you are specifically not supposed to be seen by anybody, even alone, let alone with me?"

"Yes," I say, calm but firm. "I wore a hoodie and a hat all day, no one looked at me twice." I leave out the incident with the girl and her mother. "The only person I interacted with briefly were the owners, and they definitely didn't think twice about me. We'll keep it simple, draw no attention. Just… us, and a nice, quiet dinner."

His jaw clenches slightly. I can see the part of him that wants to say no, that calculating, overprotective part that hates the idea of taking unnecessary risks. The part that desperately needs control. But I also see the flicker of something else. Hunger, maybe. Not just for food, but for normalcy.

"I just want one night," I say, not gently, exactly, but a little softer, in the hope it might win him over. "With you. Where we're not watched. Where we can act like a real couple, out in the open."

He sits up slowly. His eyes are darker now, thinking. "Yulian…"

"Vaugh," I say, voice demanding. I don't plan on giving in, even if I have to drag him from this hotel room myself. However, it would be nice if he agreed to it himself before it gets to that point.

I suspect he'll push back more, that it will take a lot more force on my part to get him to that restaurant. But, instead, his shoulders quickly drop, and he exhales. "Okay," he relents, "but you have to still wear your disguise."

I grin. "Deal."

-

We walk hand-in-hand down the dimly lit street, the city buzzing softly around us. The air is cooler now that the sun's gone down, but the warmth of Vaughn's hand in mine is more than enough.

I grabbed it tight as soon as we got out of the taxi and began walking, and though he tried to wrench it away at first, he eventually gave in when I kept my tight grip.

He keeps glancing around like he's waiting for someone to jump out of a bush, but no one gives us a second glance. We're just another couple on a busy Dublin evening. We pass a man playing violin on a corner, two teens sharing chips on a bench, a woman carrying grocery bags and laughing into her phone.

"Relax," I murmur, bumping his shoulder with mine. "You look like you're ready to draw a weapon."

"Force of habit," he mutters, but his fingers squeeze mine a little tighter.

The further we go, the more I feel him relax. The streets are full, and while Vaughn at first might have been wary of that, I think he eventually realised that it was better this way. With so many people around, it's like we're invisible. Just two random people who happen to pass by, that no one looks twice at.

We turn a corner and there it is, down that same slim, cobbled alley, with a peeling green door and fogged windows. The handwritten chalkboard outside reads: *Nora & Barry's Burgers: Dublin's Delight.*

Vaughn raises a brow. "You weren't kidding about it being tiny."

"Exactly," I say, pushing open the door. A bell jingles softly above us as we step inside.

The warmth hits first, followed by the scent of meat, grease and herbs. It's cozy inside. There aren't many tables, but when it's so tucked away, I can't think they get all that many customers. Nora looks up from behind the counter, and grins when she spots me.

She steps around it and walks toward us. "Suppose I made a good impression, then," she says to me. "And who's this?" She looks to Vaughn beside me.

I smirk back at her. Vaughn goes to open his mouth, presumably to introduce himself, but I beat him to it. Wrapping an arm around his waist, I say "this is Vaughn. My husband. A table for two, please."

Nora doesn't even blink, simply saying hello and directing us to a table. However, I feel Vaughn tense up, and he quickly leans in close to my ear. "What the hell, Yulian?"

I press my lips close to his ear. “We’re in a tucked away little restaurant, and the only ones here. Nora will never realise who we actually are. So, if I want to claim you, publicly, then I fucking will, Mishka.”

Vaughn shivers beside me. “I’m still not your husband, though.”

“Not yet, you’re not.”

Vaughn says nothing.

Nora sits us at the table and hands us some menus. The burgers, unsurprisingly, seem to be their signature dish, though they do other items such as pasta, pizza, steak and more.

Across from me, Vaughn observes the menu. “See anything you like?” he asks.

“Absolutely,” I reply, staring straight at him.

Vaughn catches my eye and grins. “You’re not so bad yourself.”

Nora walks back over to us, holding two waters, and places one down in front of each of us. We both thank her, and she asks if we’re ready to order. I look at Vaughn, and he nods, so I do too.

“Barry’s burger, please,” Vaughn requests politely.

“Make that two,” I add.

Nora nods. “Perfect, that’s my husband’s favourite thing to make, he’ll be happy you came.”

“Not as much as us,” Vaughn compliments, flashing her a blinding smile, always the charmer.

Nora laughs, before walking away.

Glancing around the restaurant, Vaughn comments on how nice and quaint it is.

“Told you so,” I say back.

Vaughn raises his brows at me. “Real mature.”

“You know me. Always the mature one.”

I begin sliding my foot up his leg under the table, getting higher and higher until Vaughn just lightly kicks me, forcing me to stop. He takes a sip of his water, licking around his lips, and suddenly I’m imagining them wrapped around my cock.

You can’t blame me, though, we haven’t done anything since the plane this morning. That’s a long time.

Catching on to the way my eyes darken at him, Vaughn makes a point

of biting his lip and batting his eyelashes at me. For a moment, I consider dragging him into the toilet, or even just outside, to the end of the alley and pushing him up against the wall so I can have my way with him.

But, unfortunately, Nora and Barry have been nothing but hospitable, so it'll have to wait until later.

-

Dinner is *incredible*.

There are a few other guests who come in during the time we're sat down, but they all choose to take their orders away, so we still mostly have the place to ourselves. Nora and Barry bring out the burgers together, holding one each.

Both are accompanied with a large portion of fries, salted to perfection. The burgers are a flawless combination of grease, flavour and crispiness. We engage in conversation with Nora while we eat, happy to listen to her stories about the history of this place. She tells us about her adult children, too, who will hopefully take over once they finish their degrees.

She asks us a few questions, too, but mostly about our thoughts on Dublin, the food and more. She seems to catch the hint and asks nothing about who we are or where we're from. Nothing about the situation feels like we're living on the edge.

When the plates are cleared, we're offered the dessert menu. Of course, we have a look. Vaughn is drawn to the apple pie, while I like the look of the gooey brownie photo on the front. We're both very full, though, so we decide to get them to go and eat them at the hotel

instead.

The bill comes quickly after that, and much to our confusion, the desserts aren't on there. When we try to tell Nora so she can correct it, she dismisses us.

"Oh, you two just forget about those. You've been so sweet. Not all people would be willing to put up listening to an old woman like me ramble on for as long as you did!" she laughs, and Vaughn immediately tells her that he enjoyed talking to her, insisting we pay for the desserts, but she stands firm in her decision.

To make up for it, Vaughn doesn't hesitate to slap down four fifty euro notes on the table, causing Nora's jaw to drop.

Instantly, she begins trying to refuse them, but Vaughn has none of it, using her own words against her.

"Are you sure?" she asks, still staring at the money in shock.

"You made him laugh," Vaughn replies, nodding toward me, "that's more than worth it."

Nora winks at me. "Then you'd better bring him back."

-

We step out into the night, wrapped up desserts in hand, and I grab Vaughn's chin, pulling him in for a deep kiss, pushing my hard on

against him.

“When we get back to the hotel,” Vaughn whispers into my mouth, biting down on my lip. I relent, eventually, and Vaughn slips his arm around my waist as we walk out of the alley and a bit further into the city until we can grab a taxi.

It’s a little quieter now, and when we eventually hop out of the taxi to the hotel entrance, I stop him before he can go in. “Thank you. For saying yes.”

He cups my cheek, brushing his thumb over my skin. “You were right. I wanted it too.”

-

We arrive back at the hotel room, dessert boxes still in hand. The quiet hum of the distant city seeps through the window, but, inside, it’s just us.

Quickly changing into much comfier clothing, we both drop onto the bed, boxes in hand.

“You want to watch a movie?” Vaughn asks. “Or at least have one on in the background?”

I know he doesn’t particularly like movies, or at least struggles to be entertained by them, so it makes me feel a little giddy to know he’s so willing to put up with them if it’s what I want. However, as much as I appreciate it, there are other things I want too.

I grin, a mischievous glint lighting up my eyes. “Maybe we don’t need a movie. Maybe we need some other… entertainment.”

He raises an eyebrow, moving closer. “Oh? And what kind of entertainment would that be?”

I lean into him, voice low and teasing. “You know… something a little more hands-on.”

Vaughn smirks, brushing a finger along my jaw. “I’m always hands-on.”

I laugh softly, but then shake my head, a bit of seriousness cutting through the playfulness. Unfortunately, I can see the dark bags under his eyes, and as much as my dick would love to get inside him right now, I know now isn’t the time. “Okay, okay, but seriously… let’s put on Harry Potter,” I say.

I feel him freeze for a moment, and curse myself for suggesting it. “Harry Potter? You? Really?”

I make a mock offended face. “It’s Harry Potter. Who doesn’t like Harry Potter?”

Vaughn chuckles, crossing his arms. “Fair enough. But you’re a fan, huh?”

I know my eyes flash, but I continue anyway. “I mean, maybe, a little. Did you know that the spells were come up with by mixing Latin with

some old English? Like *Expelliarmus*, it means to disarm. And *Lumos*, it's Latin for light. And-"

Vaughn cuts in, grinning. "Alright, Potterhead. I get it. Just a little fan, huh?"

I narrow my eyes, mock annoyed. "There's nothing wrong with it. And tonight, we're watching the first movie. No exceptions."

Now I know that Vaughn cares so little for the movies, I need to ensure it's rectified as soon as possible.

Vaughn shakes his head with a laugh and grabs the remote, flipping on the TV. The opening of the Philosophers Stone fills the room, and he has to admit, it has a little magic to it. We get through the movie, and I manage to convince him to start the second.

Though, it doesn't take long before the second movie fades into the background.

My hands find his, fingers weaving together. Our bodies lean in, the space between us shrinking. The air thickens, warm and heavy, and every glance and brush of skin sets something flickering inside me.

We may both be tired now, but I can think of something that will lull us all the way to sleep.

The first kiss comes slow, tasting of chocolate and warmth, but it quickly deepens, hungry and desperate. Clothes loosen, hands explore, and the world outside this room falls away.

The flickering light from the screen plays over his face, every curve and shadow etched into my mind. The movie's words turn to white noise as we lose ourselves in each other, the magic of this moment far more powerful than any spell on the screen.

When we finally pull back, breathless and flushed, he can't help but grin. "Maybe you were right about Harry Potter after all."

I smirk, tracing a lazy finger down his chest. "Well, of course. I'm always right."

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DAY TWO

Vaughn

-

The place they've chosen isn't the sort of restaurant you stumble into without invitation. With a glass frosted door, tablecloths on every surface, and prices that *start* at one hundred euro, I can tell this is an establishment fit for people of our status.

A hostess greets me by name before I can open my mouth, and leads me past a wall of framed photographs, depicting several politicians, businessmen and more, all of whom have apparently visited this place. She takes me toward the back of the restaurant, and then up some stairs until we reach what appears to be a private dining area situated against floor to ceiling windows, overlooking Dublin.

A single table, round, is sat at already by Conell, Padraig and Cian. The chairs are dark wood, with golden lining and the cutlery likely

hasn’t seen a dishwasher in its life. Padraig sits straight up, his face blank, hands clasped together, like a soldier at attention. Cian appears more relaxed; sprawled with one ankle hooked over his knee, smirking.

When the three spot me approaching, they all stand in respect.

"Vaughn," Conell says, voice deep and warm, "you’re looking well this morning. Hope our city is treating you well."

He reaches out and I clasp his hand in my own, giving it a firm shake. I then more to Padraig, whose grip is tight, while Cian’s almost seems sarcastic in a way.

"It’s great," I reply, taking the seat across from him. "Though I can’t say it’s better than New York."

Cian chuckles, leaning forward. "No, no. I suppose it’s not."

The waitress slips in with coffee for me without asking. There are no menus, we simply ask for what we want, and the kitchen provides. I take notice of their meeting place of choice. Yesterday, it was somewhere dark and damp, in a run-down area that wasn’t particularly pleasant.

Today, however, after our pleasantries yesterday, it seems that they’ve been willing to up the standards quite a bit.

Conell jumps straight in, just as he did yesterday. I’m beginning to learn it’s something I like about him. "Yesterday went well. I think we can agree on that, but today we get into the bones of it. I’ve already

mentioned that we don't have long today, so let's not waste time." He leans back, eyes on me like he's weighing every blink.

"Let's," I agree. "We'll start with what we can offer. Stability, for one. My father's network is already deep in Eastern Europe. Presumably, you already know of our relations with the Morellis in Italy. The supply lines are solid; the routes are proven. What we would need from you, is a middle-point."

"And what does that look like?" Cian asks.

"If you can buy an old airfield, or even an empty piece of land to build on, then you would serve as a place where we can fly our goods before moving them further into Europe. Depending on the level of involvement you're interested in, your role could simply be to watch over and sort out admin until we're ready to move the product, or, if you're interested in something more involved, you could even take over the goods once they reach you and be in charge of distributing them how you see fit."

Conell nods his head. "And I presume our cut will depend on our level of involvement."

I shrug. "It's only fair."

Padraig speaks up for the first time, his voice low. "And how exactly do you see us distributing? What can we do that you can't?"

"You're access," I say. "You've got ports that aren't being fully exploited. Cargo goes in and out under a hundred different flags. My people can move product faster if we're using your routes. That means profit for both sides."

“Ports not being exploited?” Conell questions.

I nod my head. “We’ve looked at it before. Some ports you overuse, and others you underuse. If you changed them around, it would be much more profitable. Of course, we could never do it ourselves, as we wouldn’t encroach on your territory. But now we can. If you’re willing, of course.”

-

The food arrives, plates of smoked salmon, soft scrambled eggs, dark bread. We all dig in happily as we continue our negotiation.

Conell steeples his fingers. "Ports and profit are fine, but business isn’t just numbers. It’s about knowing when you can depend on a man. I want a guarantee that you’ll help us out in other areas, too. Like I’ve said, lower ranking members have been trying to break off. Loyalty is waning in some areas. I need it fixed."

I hold his gaze. "I’m aware. We’ll help you rebuild with people that can be trusted, and people that will stay loyal."

Conell’s brow twitches. Cian just grins like he’s waiting for me to slip.

Padraig doesn’t blink. "Then tell me, why should I trust *you*?"

"Because I know the value of a deal that holds," I say. "The worst thing for either of us would be to invest in building something only to burn it down over pride. I don’t do fragile business. If we shake on it, it

stands."

"And if we cross you?" Cian asks, casual as tossing a coin.

"Then I make sure you never do it twice." I sip my coffee. "Same way you would."

That gets a low laugh from Conell. "You're your father's son after all. But I like that you don't waste time with sugar-coating."

-

We eat, but the conversation never really stops.

Padraig pushes into specifics; shipment capacities, security rotations, chain of command if something goes wrong. I can tell he'll make a good leader one day. I answer without hesitation, laying out contingency plans I know will appeal to him: training ideas, fallback points, routes that shift unpredictably to avoid pattern recognition.

"You've thought this through," he says finally.

"I don't walk into meetings to improvise," I reply. "And I don't take on allies who do."

Cian interrupts, leaning back with his coffee. "Say we agree. What's your play in five years? Expansion? Or are you the kind who's happy keeping us small and tidy?"

"I’m not here to keep you in a box," I say. "But expansion without control is just chaos. I want both."

Conell nods slowly, like he’s filing that away.

-

The rest of brunch is a test wrapped in conversation. They throw scenarios at me, rival groups muscling in, unexpected law enforcement pressure, a key shipment gone missing. I answer each one with calm precision, never raising my voice, never looking away.

By the time the plates are cleared, a lot has been discussed, despite the short amount of time. Though, I know there is still a lot to get through.

Conell sets his napkin down. "I appreciate your time today, Vaughn. But it is time for us to head out, though I think we’ve got enough to chew on for now. Do have a think about the things we’ve discussed, and we can have a lengthy discussion tomorrow."

"Of course. Tomorrow, then," I say, standing when they do.

“One more thing,” Padraig interrupts.

I cock my head at him, waiting.

“You mentioned a potential marriage pact. With your… cousin? Was it? I’d like to check in if that’s still on the table.”

I narrow my eyes at him questioningly. I wouldn’t have thought Padraig would be very eager to marry, especially someone he didn’t choose. “I haven’t put it off the table yet,” I answer, “though, I have yet to speak to her about it.”

Padraig offers a short nod, approval in his own reserved way. “Perhaps have that ready for tomorrow then,” he tells me. “Just so all the cards are on the table.”

Cian grins, wiggling his eyes at his brother, who levels him with a glare.

“I will,” I confirm.

Cian claps me on the shoulder as we walk out. "You’re not as stiff as I thought. Might even like you, Morozov."

"Careful," I tell him. "You’ll ruin your reputation."

Conell laughs, and it’s genuine this time. "We’ll see you tomorrow, Vaughn. Come ready."

"I always do," I say.

-

I step out into the chill of the Dublin Street, the sharp air pulling focus away from the buzzing restaurant behind me. I step into the waiting car, my phone already in my hand as I get comfortable.

I scroll through my contacts until I find her name. Lidya.

It rings twice before she picks up.

“Vaughn? Hi! I thought you were doing work stuff for a couple days. Is everything okay?” Her voice is soft, though bright and cheerful. A hint of uncertainty, too.

“Everything’s fine,” I say, leaning back against my seat. “How are you?”

“I’m… good. Busy with classes. Mum says hi, by the way, she’s been meaning to ask how you’re getting on since the move. How about you?”

“I’m alright. Tired. Work’s been… interesting.”

I don’t go into detail, both because this trip is supposed to be kept on the down low, and because Lidya couldn’t care less, if she’s being honest. Her interest in our sort of business is pretty much null.

We chat for a few minutes, just exchanging pleasantries and catching up. I ask about her exams; she asks about mine (I haven’t even stopped to think how close they are. It’s lucky I inherited my parents’ natural intellect, or I’d be screwed). We exchange the small pieces of life we miss when we don’t talk. And then I take a breath, because the

next part isn't casual.

"Lid," I say, my voice quieter now, "there's something I want to ask you. But before I do, I need you to know this, your answer is entirely up to you. No pressure, no expectation. I'll be fine, the family will be fine, regardless of what you say. I spoke to my father already, and he agrees with the idea, but also that you have the final word. You know he'd never make you do anything you don't want to, nor would I. Whatever your answer is, it stands."

There's a pause. "You're scaring me a little," she says with a nervous laugh. "What is this about?"

I exhale slowly. "I'm in Ireland right now. Negotiating with the O'Sullivan family, they recently came into control most of the organized crime here. However, it's very unstable at the moment, so we've been discussing possible ways to strengthen ties between our families. One of the ideas that's been floated… is a marriage pact."

There's a silence on the other end. When she speaks again, her voice is smaller. "…What?" I might not have asked it directly, but Lidya is smart. As soon as I referenced marriage, she knows what this is.

"It's just a discussion," I say quickly. "It's not decided, it's not a requirement. But if it were to happen, it would likely be with Padraig O'Sullivan, the heir. He's a little older than you. And nothing would happen until you've finished university."

She hesitates. The other end of the line is quiet for a while, but I don't interrupt her thoughts. "If I agreed… I'd have to move to Ireland? Away from Mum and Dad?"

"Yes." I keep my tone steady, but I already know that's going to be the

sticking point. Lidya's always been close to her parents, especially since the bombing. Asking her to leave them is like asking her to cut out part of herself.

"Would it really help?" she asks finally. "The family, I mean?"

"It would," I admit. "But there are other ways to build an alliance. Other deals we could make. This isn't the only path. And if you said no, I wouldn't push you. You can change your mind at any time. You don't owe anyone a yes."

She's quiet for a moment. "What's… what's he like? Padraig?"

I hesitate, because sugarcoating isn't my style, but neither is shattering her right away. "He's… hard to read. Stoic. Keeps things close. He's not the most talkative person I've ever met." I pause. "And he doesn't exactly give off an affectionate type of vibe."

The way her breath hitches is barely audible, but I catch it. Lidya is sweet and kind, and she deserves someone who will appreciate that beauty, put it on a pedestal. Not squash it down.

Padraig might make a great leader someday, but from what I've seen of him so far, I'm not sure he'd make a great husband.

"Lid," I say gently, "you can say no right now, and that's the end of it. No fallout. No bad blood. It's your life."

"I think…" she trails off, then takes a breath. "I think I'd struggle being away from my parents, so I won't say it's a one hundred percent yes. Not yet. But I… I want to help, if this is what you guys need. If

it's the best solution, in the end, then I'll say yes."

That doesn't surprise me. Lidya, while definitely never wanting to be truly involved with the sort of work we do, still wishes desperately to be as helpful as she can without being as tangled in our web. I know it's something that bothers her, the fact that her aversion to violence means she can't aid us the way she wants.

"Okay," I say, and I mean it. "That's more than fair. There's time. And even if you did say yes, there's no guarantee we'd go through with it, we might find another way that works better for everyone."

"Alright," she says, her voice lightening a fraction. "Thanks for telling me, Vaughn."

"Always," I say. "We'll talk soon."

We say our goodbyes, and I end the call.

-

Yulian

-

The wind tastes like freedom up here, sharp and wild against my tongue. The Dublin Mountains stretch out in ragged waves beneath a sky so wide that I can't see where they end. Vaughn's in front of me, steady and measured, climbing happily over the rocks.

I'm still shocked I even managed to convince him to do this, but I

think after last night, after it went so well and we faced no issues, Vaughn has relaxed a little at the idea of us venturing out together. So, here we are, hiking the Dublin mountains.

I jog up beside him, catching his attention with a grin that's more trouble than charm. "Hey, Mishka, what's the rush? Trying to leave me behind, or just running from your own shadow?"

He glances back with a raised eyebrow, cool and unimpressed. "If I wanted to escape you, you wouldn't hear a word."

I laugh, a harsh bark that echoes off the rocks. "Shadows are the sneakiest bastards. You think you're ahead, but they're always a step behind, creeping up on you when you least expect it."

Vaughn rolls his eyes, "don't I know it…" he mutters. He slows, lets me pull ahead. I dart around, flicking his shoulder with a sharp jab as I pass. "Ow! Not the shoulder, Zmejka. I have important work to do."

"Important work? Like sitting in fancy restaurants and shaking hands?"

"Exactly." Deadpan. But I catch the faintest flicker of a smile.

We climb higher. There are less and less people around us the further we go, until we go up to ten minutes at a time without seeing anyone.

I stop at a jagged edge and spread my arms wide. "Woo!" I shout, "freedom, baby!"

“*Yulian*,” Vaughn stresses, looking at how close I am to the edge, “get away from there. You’re too close.”

I huff at him, but step away nonetheless, and he instantly looks relieved.

-

The trail narrows, jagged rocks jutting out like teeth, roots coiling underfoot, ready to trip the unwary. I push ahead, because I like knowing he has to follow me, that I can set the pace and he’ll keep up whether he wants to or not.

Behind me, Vaughn’s steps are slower, deliberate. “Watch it, Yulian. I’m not carrying you back if you snap an ankle.”

I glance over my shoulder with a smirk. “Sure, you would. You’d bitch the whole time, but you’d still do it.”

His eyes narrow, the faintest threat lurking there. “Don’t test me.”

We hit a clearing where the wind cuts sharp across my face, snapping through the twisted trees. I stand still for a moment, letting it hit me head-on, almost daring it to knock me down.

“You look like you’re about to pick a fight with the weather,” Vaughn says.

I grin. “Why not? Chaos doesn’t scare me. You should know that by

now.”

His gaze lingers on me in that calculating way of his, the way you’d look at something dangerous in your hands, weighing whether it’s worth keeping. “No,” he says finally. “It doesn’t scare you.”

Gripping him by the chin, I pull him in for a kiss, “you know me so well.”

Vaughn hums. “Sometimes it scares me just how deeply I do.”

His voice is raw and vulnerable and I fucking love the way it sounds. I love him opening up to me, admitting things to me, things from the deepest parts of his brain.

“Good,” I growl in his ear, “because I want to know everything about you too.”

-

Later, we stop under a gnarled oak, the kind that looks older than the country itself. I drop down into the dirt without ceremony, stretching my legs. Vaughn sits beside me, not close enough to touch. So I fix that, leaning into his space until our shoulders meet and wrapping my arm possessively around his waist.

“Trying to avoid my touch, Mishka?” I ask. “You should know by now you can never get away from me.”

Vaughn's eyes focus on mine, before darting down to my lips and then back up again. "Who says I want to?"

Knowing exactly what he wants, I bite his lips before claiming them. When I pull back, I say "that's probably for the best, because if you did, I'd have to steal you away. Take you somewhere no one would find us."

Vaughn chuckles. "You'd *steal* me away?"

"Mhm," I nod, "or we could just run. Depending how willing you're feeling I suppose."

His jaw flexes. "You wouldn't last a week without trouble to cause."

I laugh. "Maybe. But you'd follow me anyway."

His eyes cut to me, sharp. "Don't flatter yourself."

"You'd miss me."

"I'd hunt you."

We stare at each other for a beat too long, and I'm not sure which one of us means it more.

-

The wind bites at us here at the top of the mountains, sharp and wild, the air high enough that I can feel the freshness in my lungs. Vaughn's got his arms crossed, pretending it's just the cold making his jaw tight. I know better.

Far below, the valleys twist into shadow, and the peaks sit in the distance. It's quiet. My mind starts filling the silence with thoughts I shouldn't have, or maybe I should.

He's too close. Or maybe I am. My shoulder brushes his, and I watch the way his eyes cut to me, that warning in them. He thinks I'll stop, but he should know better by now.

"You keep looking at the view," I murmur, low enough that the wind almost eats it, "but I can think of something better to watch." My hand drifts, deliberately slow, to his lower back, sliding under the edge of his jacket. He stiffens but doesn't step away. That's my tell. His body betrays him before his mouth can start lying.

"Zmejka." Just my nickname, rough like gravel. But the thing is, I know his tells. If he meant it, he'd call me Yulian. But *Zmejka*… I know what he wants, even if he wouldn't admit it.

I step in, crowding him toward the ledge. Not dangerously close, not yet, but close enough that he can feel my breath against his ear. "No one's here," I say. "I could take you right here, right now. And no one would know."

He exhales like he's trying to push the thought away, but his pulse is pounding under my hand. "We're not doing this here."

“Why not?” My fingers hook into his belt loop, tugging him toward me. His eyes flash, and for a second, I swear he’s about to give in. The way his lips part, he’s seconds from it.

Then he steps back. Not far, but enough to remind me that Vaughn’s stubborn streak is bigger than my ego. “Because I’m not getting my dick out to let it freeze off. And I’m not walking back down this mountain with cum filled underwear.” he says, voice firm.

And, okay, yeah, I suppose that’s fair. I also don’t want my dick to freeze off. I shiver just at the thought of it.

Though… “I think I could keep your dick pretty warm, Mishka,” I smirk slyly, licking my lips.

But no. “When we get back to the hotel,” Vaughn states. Fine, I can wait, I suppose.

I grin, slow and sharp. “You promise?”

His glare could cut glass. “Don’t push me.”

But the way his gaze dips to my mouth? That’s not a warning. That’s anticipation. And I’ll make him keep that promise.

-

The hike continues as we start on our way back down the mountain, the air cooling as the sun bleeds out behind the hills. Vaughn stays a

step behind me, like he's guarding my back, but I know it's just as much about keeping me in his sight.

When the trail narrows again, I reach back without looking, catch his hand, squeeze it, and keep walking. And though his fingers twitch, like he's considering pulling away, he ends up squeezing my hand back just as hard.

-

The moment we shut the hotel room door behind us, the exhaustion hits like a freight train. My legs feel like rubber bands stretched too far, and Vaughn's usual armour of seriousness is visibly cracked, he's slouching, rubbing his neck, looking like he could fall asleep standing.

On the way, we stopped at a pizza place, the greasiest, filthiest one we could find. It's what we deserve after the number of calories we must have burnt today.

I flop on the bed, dragging the pizza boxes after me. Vaughn sits down next to me, stretching out, appearing completely relaxed.

I rip open the box, and the smell hits me, salty, cheesy, perfection.

"Want the first slice, Mishka?"

He raises an eyebrow. "You're so generous."

"Of course. I'm a giver," I reply with a wink. We might be exhausted,

but I'm getting what I'm owed from the top of the mountain.

He rolls his eyes but reaches out, taking a slice before I can grab it for him.

I make a show of being offended. "Hey! That's the biggest one."

He grins, biting into the pizza like it's the best thing he's eaten all day.

I grab a slice and take a bite, leaning back against the headboard. The room is warm and dim. Vaughn grabs the remote, clicking a few buttons before the screen lights up with the next Harry Potter film, continuing from last night.

"Thought you didn't care for these films," I say, mouth full.

He shrugs. "I don't. But I can tell you do."

Whatever smartass reply I had dies on my lips, and I simply grin playfully at him. "Mishka, you are so getting your dick sucked later."

We watch in companionable silence for a bit, until I start saying the lines along with the characters. Vaughn pretends it annoys him, rolling his eyes and complaining, but I can tell by the soft smile on his face every time I open my mouth that he loves it really.

We sit for another hour or two, watching the movie until the end. Our hands brush as we reach for another slice, despite it being cold now, and I don't pull away. Instead, I let my fingers linger, tracing lazy

circles on his wrist, until I start trailing my fingers up his arm.

He looks at me, eyes dark and warm. “You’re impossible.”

“Yeah, but you like it.”

He shakes his head, smiling softly. “Maybe.”

He catches my mouth with his, gentle but demanding, and suddenly the room feels like it’s shrinking around us. “Fucking finally,” I groan into his mouth.

I feel his hard on press against my stomach. He grins at me. “I believe you said something earlier about sucking my dick?”

Nipping at his jaw playfully, I kiss him once more, before crawling down his body, and begin pulling down his sweats.

The pizza boxes are empty, the movie credits rolling, and we’re tangled together on the bed. I don’t think this trip could get any more perfect. I don’t think *he* could be anymore perfect.

Chapter End Notes

> i hope you enjoyed the first part of the ireland trip. i wont go into too much detail about, as ill do it and the end of the next chap instead.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Notes

i hope you enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

DAY THREE

Vaughn

-

The morning light barely filters through the heavy curtains when I'm already dressed and running through the details in my mind. Today is the day, the major negotiation.

Tomorrow should be our last day, and thus hopefully only involving drafting some documents and signing them. Thus, all the nitty gritty details must be discussed today. I know they've cleared their whole day, and of course I'm free too.

Despite the tiring end to the day last night, I still went to sleep with some nerves. Yulian decided that the best way to help me with that is to wake me up with his lips wrapped around my cock, and well, I wouldn't say it *didn't* help.

When it's time, I press a goodbye kiss to Yulian's lips, and he tells me he knows I'll do great.

When I arrive, Conell O'Sullivan, Cian and Padraig all sit at the table, the same as yesterday, waiting.

“Good to see you again,” Conell greets.

“And you,” I reply, “let’s get right into this.

They all nod.

“We’d like to start by addressing the pressing concerns our organization faces right now,” Padraig begins.

I gesture for him to continue.

“Of course, we have the strongest claim and control right now, but it’s vulnerable, and others know it. We have some members, lower ranking, who are attempting to break away, start their own clans, and take our men with them. Loyalty is wavering.”

“Then let them go,” I state.

All three of them furrow their brows, not expecting that answer.

Cian clears his throat. “Don’t know if we’ve mentioned this Morozov, but we need to get them back on our side, build our crew up again, not get rid of them completely.”

I hum, “why do you?”

Cian’s mouth gapes.

“If they’re willing to break away, betray you, once, then they can do it again. Those are not the sort of people you want on your side. So, let them go. When you continue to rise up, they’ll start to fall, and eventually, come crawling back. And when they do, you’ll turn them away for their disloyalty,” I explain. “Or just put them straight in the ground,” I smirk.

Conell seems to consider my proposal for a moment, before nodding. “That is a good idea in theory, yes, but it doesn’t change the fact that we are already short of men as it is, and you’re telling us to get rid of more.”

That’s a fair point. “I understand, and that’s why we are willing to send over some of our own men to work under you until you replenish your ranks. We’ll also assist in finding and vetting more, from here in Ireland, showing you how to tell exactly how to tell who to trust.”

For a moment, Conell appears to think about it, before agreeing.

However, Padraig’s voice is low and cautious, as he doesn’t agree quite as much. “While we appreciate your willingness to help, giving you that level of control means risk. What guarantees can you offer that your people won’t overreach? That this doesn’t become a takeover disguised as an alliance?”

“I understand that concern,” I say firmly. “Respecting boundaries is fundamental. We establish clear zones of influence, with shared oversight on overlapping interests. Transparency between us will prevent misunderstandings. This isn’t about one side swallowing the other.”

Conell nods slowly. “Good. But what about security? Information leaks, betrayals, those are the real threats. How do you propose we protect ourselves?”

I tap the edge of the table, eyes steady. “I can assure you that my men are fully loyal and can absolutely be trusted. However, if it would ease your nerves, we’re willing to give you complete authority over the men we send over while they’re here. Of course, we will check in to ensure they’re being treated right, but they will be instructed to listen and obey your full orders while here. They will still do their job of assisting building up your ranks, but only with your final say.”

Conell’s expression shifts. “Loyalty is a fragile currency. How do you plan to integrate your people with ours without tipping the balance?”

I meet his gaze. “I’m not looking for full integration. I respect your chains of command. What I want are trusted individuals who can bridge communications and ensure transparency. People who understand both sides and speak the same language.”

Padraig leans forward, steepling his fingers. “And what about vetting? How do you guarantee your people won’t compromise operations?”

“We have strict vetting protocols and internal audits,” I say. “Any breach is met with swift, decisive action. No exceptions.”

Cian scoffs lightly. “Sounds good on paper, but we all know how loyalty can twist.”

I shrug, letting the honesty hang between us. “Loyalty is earned, not demanded. But it starts at the top. If I show unwavering commitment to this alliance, my people will follow.”

The room falls silent for a beat before Conell nods slowly.

Cian snorts, a sly grin spreading across his face. “Sounds like we get more pets to play with.”

I shoot him a hardened glare. “My men are not pets. They may be under your authority, but they are still under our protection. Any sign of mistreatment and not only will they be pulled back to New York, but we’ll destroy your entire organization.”

Padraig scowls at his brother. “I can assure you; we will treat your men with as much respect as we would our own. Please excuse my brother, he is full of shit.”

The table jumps a little as it seems Cian kicks Padraig under the table, who in turn growls and leans over to hit him back, only to be stopped by their father, who clears his throat.

“Apologies, Vaughn,” Conell says, side-eyeing his sons, “clearly, my boys haven’t quite matured to your level yet.”

Padraig, at least, appears sorry for his actions. Cian, however, does not.

“You have my word your men will be handled right. I thank you for the offer of sending them here, it is a fine plan,” Conell states.

The conversation shifts to logistics: expanding on what we discussed yesterday in regard to ports, routes, movements of goods and more. I answer without hesitation, knowing this is where credibility is won or lost.

Then, we move into financial discussions. We discuss profit sharing,

what sort of cuts each of us expect to get, as well as investments and operational costs. I present a balanced proposal, outlining how both sides benefit equitably, with built-in flexibility for market changes. Of course, I make it clear that the overall cut to each of our organizations will not be equal.

It is us who will be putting the most resources into this alliance, and thus, us who will make the most profit. Even so, while we may make the most cash, it is the Irish who will still benefit most overall. Cian grumbles and Padraig's jaw clenches as I present the numbers. I start intentionally low, knowing they'll fight to get a higher cut.

I agree, as they'll think they've won something by managing to negotiate a higher profit.

Padraig links his hands together. "You've stated that the men you'll send over will serve as a bridge, but will that be the only sort of communication between us? Surely, we should have other, more formal methods of transparency to ensure we are staying on the same page."

I lean back in my seat, shrugging my shoulders. "I agree. What do you propose?"

So far, I feel as if it's been mostly me suggesting. I want them to feel as if they are equally involved, even if the partnership itself might not be entirely equal. That way, we start on similar footing. If this alliance starts with them feeling too subordinate, it won't last long.

Padraig looks a little surprised by my offer to allow him to suggest the ideas, but he hides it well, and it doesn't last long. He leans forward in his seat, sitting up straight. "Monthly joint audits. You send a member of your organization over one month, then we'll send a member of ours the next and so on. Both will be high ranking members who will

come with all the relevant information to discuss how things are going and if any concerns need to be addressed."

I nod my head, gesturing for him to continue. Out the corner of my eye, I see a look of proudness on Conell's face. "As well as the monthly reviews, bi-annual ones too. These will be between the Pakhan's themselves, or, their heirs, since you especially have been so involved in creating this alliance. This can be less about logistics, and more about keeping friendly and catching up on anything relevant."

"Anything else?" I ask.

Padraig clears his throat. "Any issues will be addressed by both sides, and the resolution must also be agreed upon by both sides. I understand that you have the larger authority within this pact, but it is important we have our say too."

I can tell by the way he said it that he's finished now. And if I'm entirely honest, I think his proposal is brilliant. It is almost exactly what I came up with myself, which I would have suggested if they failed to recommend their own idea.

Even Cian looks impressed by his brother's speech, looking at him with something similar to awe.

I take a breath, and I see tension in Padraig's shoulders. Even though he's older than me, it's clear who the more powerful one here is. Here I sit, alone, representing my entire organization in a major alliance that could affect us both for years, even decades to come, showing exactly the sort of leader, I'll be one day.

And yet Padraig only sits beside his father, who still takes the lead. But this is his moment. The moment he gets to truly show off his

abilities as the future leader, who will likely take over around the same time I will. I have no doubt we'll work together much more in the future.

My silence has lasted almost too long, though Padraig doesn't look nervous. He looks tense, yes, perhaps at the idea he could be rejected in front of his father, who he clearly doesn't want to disappoint. Watching him now, looking him in the eye, I'm not sure he's even capable of feeling nervous. The look in his eye is similar to what I see every time I look at Jeremy or Killian.

Finally, I sigh, and I see Padraig's jaw clench. "I completely agree," I say.

To his credit, Padraig has barely any visible response. He simply thanks me. However, his father looks at him with so much approval that if I didn't have my own father who constantly gives me the same look, I might even be jealous.

"What about marketing?" Cian jumps in, "how are we going to make people buy our shit?"

I sigh, pondering the question. "Well, with time, you should reach the point where you don't need to ask people to buy your product, rather, people will go to you first, as you must build a reputation. However, like you said, there are a lot of smaller clans breaking off and forming right now, so we have a lot of rivals to counter."

Cian laughs dryly. "I suppose you aren't afraid of stepping on any toes."

I smirk. "Not in the slightest."

Conell leans forward. “How exactly do you plan on countering these rivals. What will make customers come to us rather than anyone else?”

“Quality,” I state. “While you might not have the funds to do it yourself, with our help, we can produce goods with a higher value than any rival factions.

The room hums with unspoken agreement.

Hours tick by. Our conversation deepens into specific protocols, communication methods, emergency signals, chain-of-command contingencies. We discuss safehouses, even pulling up a map of Dublin so we can plan the best places, choose specific buildings and add renovations to the budget.

I’m deliberate, measured, knowing every word shapes the future.

Finally, we start drafting a document. Putting words on paper, showing that our long, drawn-out discussions mean something, that there is evidence we have created something real and important. Every clause is examined thoroughly, ensuring that the final product is fair and just.

The room feels heavier now, like every word carries the weight of the future we’re trying to build.

Afternoon light slants through the tall windows, catching the dust motes that swirl between us as we dive deeper into the details. Every point we cover peels back another layer, more complex, more fragile.

Hours blur as we dissect every sentence. Nothing is left vague. I'm firm but fair, always circling back to trust and mutual respect.

At one point, Padraig presses, "What about dealing with law enforcement? Do we share strategies?"

"Absolutely. We have a brilliant legal counsel. The best in the world. Your encouraged to build your own, but at least in the beginning, you'll have access to them just as we do."

Cian grins, "Sounds like we're getting ready to run a small country."

"Well, Ireland is on the smaller side, isn't it? If all goes to plan, you will run a small country one day."

Cian's mouth drops as he seems to fully comprehend just the level of power we're working towards them gaining. The same way my family rules over New York, and other parts of the US, and even the world, the O'Sullivan's will rule Ireland.

By late afternoon, the energy shifts. We're no longer just negotiating partners but architects of something bigger. Finally, Conell turns to me.

"There is one other thing I'd like to discuss with you. It's big, and important, and I understand it should have been brought up before, but I wanted to see just what you could offer us first."

I narrow my eyes at him, but nod, gesturing for him to go on.

He sighs. “My sons mean a great deal to me.” I see both of them narrow their eyes, as if confused by what he’s about to say.

“And one day, my eldest will take over. When he does, I’d like to be giving him a full, complete, and *independent* organization.”

My jaw clenches. Independent? What the fuck have we been doing all this for? Does he not know what an alliance is?

“Before you say anything,” Conell interrupts my thoughts, “let me explain. It truly means a great deal, your willingness to help us. And our partnership is something I look forward to greatly. I like to think that even I will learn new things from it. But I did not hope to go into a partnership to gain control of Dublin’s underworld only to share it for the rest of time.”

He pauses for a moment. “It will take many years to reach the level of control we’re aiming for. If we wanted to reach the level your family has, it would take decades. And while we will always be grateful for your help, I would like this agreement to be based in the idea that eventually, we will break away from the alliance so that full profits, ownership and control will be released back into Irish hands.

I sit back in my chair, listening closely, my mind thinking deeply.

He continues. “Of course, when that does happen, a new agreement could potentially be made about transporting goods and what not. Whatever happens, we will not forget what you have done for us. But I want it in writing that one day, all authority over my family and organization, will be released back to us. This agreement will not be about fully integrating our groups permanently, but also working to build mine back up until we’re ready to do it entirely on our own.”

He finishes by looking me straight in the eye, clearly standing his ground.

Cian looks a little unsure, as if he perhaps wasn't entirely aware of this part of their plan. Padraig, however, looks unsurprised, holding firm. Whether that's because he already knew about it, or because he hides his emotions well, I don't know.

I ponder his idea. While I definitely would have liked to hear it earlier, I do understand why he didn't. Any leader would eventually want full control back, it's completely justified. And he's made it clear that even after we relinquish any authority we have, they will not forget the good deeds we have done for them.

It is a big decision, and one that I'm not sure I can make in the moment. I wish I were more certain, more in control. My father would already have his answer by now, but I don't.

"I… appreciate why you've suggested this. But you must know it is not a small decision to make."

Conell nods his head.

"Let us finish the rest of the document, and any other ideas to be discussed. As for including an eventual end to our agreement, let me speak to my father tonight, and I will come back to you tomorrow."

"That is a wise decision, Vaughn," Conell says, "thank you for taking it as well as you did."

I nod my head.

We continue on for a few more hours, fining out the details, though my head is still stuck on their final request. It's a pretty big one, as requests go. While the end of our alliance may not be the worst thing in the world, the potential issues that could come after it might be.

Years in the future, when our alliance would end, my own organization would have spent years with access to Irish ports, channels and more. If we somehow failed to reach another agreement that didn't involve our authority or control like this agreement does, we would lose access to it all.

I need some sort of confirmation that no matter what, once the alliance ends, and my family no longer has a level of authority over the Irish mafia, our organizations can still continue to work together.

I decide it's something to discuss with my father. The evening starts to settle in, and the final document begins to solidify. All that's left is their final request, which will be implemented tomorrow, depending on how my discussion with my father goes.

"I think that's enough for today," Conell states. "We'll finish it off tomorrow."

Padraig looks like he's ready to keep going, Cian too, but then Conell turns to them and adds,
"Leave us. I want to speak with Vaughn alone."

Both brothers start to protest, Cian with a frown, Padraig with a sharper edge to his voice, but Conell cuts them off with that tone fathers reserve for sons who've already lost the argument. They leave without another word, the heavy door shutting behind them. The

silence that follows is thick.

Conell studies me for a long moment, then says,

"This isn't something that's going in the document. Won't be relevant to the deal. But I've been watching you these last few days. I think you're a man who can be trusted."

I nod, staying quiet. He's not the type who says something like that lightly.

"I love my sons, Vaughn. I'd do anything for them." His voice is steady, but there's a tightness there. "Padraig told you that I'd first wanted to approach the Bratva for this alliance. That much is true. What he didn't tell you is why."

"Why?" I ask.

He leans forward, voice low. "Cian is gay."

I don't move. My blood stills. The words claw straight into me, because they hit too close to something I know far too well. Something with Yulian.

"He's never told me," Conell continues. "I'm not sure he ever will. But I know. I'm his father, I just… know. I don't know if he's told Padraig, but I'd wager Padraig's figured it out."

He glances at the darkened window. "You know the kind of work we're in. I know the challenges a man like him would face. I want to

make this world into one where my son doesn't have to hide. Where he could tell me who he really is without fearing what it would mean. It's why I hadn't wanted to go to the Italian's first. I knew they would never give him that."

The weight in my chest is suffocating. I hear his words, but all I can think of is Yulian's laugh, Yulian's mouth and the way we've been hiding for months.

"I've seen the way your Bratva operates," Conell says. "Your uncles in Russia. The Sokolov heir and his boyfriend. Your future legal counsel, Gareth Carson, wasn't it? Another one with a man at his side. You've built something where people like my son could still be themselves. I want that. I want an organization my sons would be proud to inherit."

He leans back. "I don't expect you to do anything with this information. I just hope I haven't told you for nothing."

I meet his eyes. "Your secret's safe with me."

Conell shakes his head. "That's the problem, Vaughn. I don't want my son to be a secret."

The air between us feels heavier than when we were drafting terms of power and territory. We stand, shake hands, and walk out together, but I'm carrying more than just the weight of this deal now.

-

Yulian

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I'm out on the streets of Dublin again, the city buzzing with life, the sky hanging low and grey like it's been holding its breath all morning. There's a chill in the air that's sharper than I expected, but whatever, nothing a reckless dash through a crowded market can't fix.

First things first: survival. No, not the usual survival, but the kind that involves figuring out what the hell to eat for lunch. I pass a food stall selling something called 'Boxty'. Boxty? Sounds like a slap in the face. Turns out it's a potato pancake, which I promptly decide is basically heaven disguised as street food. I wolf down a couple, ignoring the suspicious looks from a nearby group of elderly women who clearly don't trust my enthusiasm.

Stomach sorted, I'm free to wander. Dublin's streets are a tangled mess of cobblestones and history, with people filtering about, speaking in accents so thick I'm not entirely sure it's English. Then, as I listen closer and start reading signs, I realise it's because they actually aren't speaking English. Most do, but some speak Gaelic.

I find myself near Trinity College, that grand old fortress of knowledge. Tourists swarm around, snapping pictures of the Long Room library like it's some sacred temple. I sneak inside, ducking under the velvet ropes, and pretend I'm a scholar discovering forbidden texts.

"If only," I mutter. There's a reason I barely attend class.

My phone buzzes. A message from Vaughn: *How's the solo adventure? Don't get into too much trouble.*

I smirk, thumbs flying as I reply: *Trouble's my middle name.*

Truth is, I'm a mess of nerves and excitement. Things with Vaughn feel different lately. Softer, yet charged with something dangerous. He's seems more accepting, even returning, my possessive nature. I catch myself replaying moments from our hike yesterday, his laugh, the way his hand felt in mine, and a weird, fluttery feeling kicks me in the gut. Stupid, stupid feelings.

I shake it off and push forward.

The streets twist and fold into hidden corners and alleyways where tourists don't bother to go. That's where the real city hides, the one with graffiti-splashed walls and hole-in-the-wall shops. At the least, it's where we found the best restaurant in all of Ireland.

I duck into a tiny bookstore that smells like paper and old secrets. The owner, a grizzled man with spectacles perched on the tip of his nose, watches me with one eyebrow raised, like I'm some character from a Dickens novel who wandered in by mistake.

I scan the shelves, pretending to care about the dusty tomes. While I don't care for any of these myself, Vaughn seems to enjoy reading very much, so I consider buying him a book or two. I pick out a few and buy them, with the owner eyeing me suspiciously the whole time.

I stroll back out onto the street.

Suddenly, my phone buzzes again. Another message from Vaughn: *Going to be a long day. Takeout again?*

I stare at the screen and type back: *I'll have it waiting x*

Vaughn: Thank you, Zmejka <3

I'd be lying if I said the heart didn't make my own heart skip a beat.

The afternoon drifts on. I lose track of time, weaving through parks, ducking into cafés where poets scribble into notebooks, and street performers play mournful tunes on worn guitars.

By sunset, I find myself standing on a bridge overlooking the River Liffey, the city lights flickering on like stars come to rest on earth. Finally, I receive a message from Vaughn that he's just finishing up and will be back soon. So, I head to a Chinese place I saw and grab a bit of everything, before heading back to the hotel.

-

The moment Vaughn's key clicks in the door, I know the day has taken its toll. His shoulders are tight, jaw clenched, and his eyes, usually sharp and guarded, look like they're carrying the weight of a thousand battles.

He steps inside, closing the door softly behind him, and for a second, he just leans there, as if he's trying to shed the day like a second skin.

I don't say a word. Instead, I pat the bed and gesture for him to come closer. The takeout sits on the table in the corner of the room, but it hasn't been long since I arrived back myself, so it should keep warm for a while longer.

He hesitates, then lowers himself onto the edge, rubbing a hand over his face like he's wiping away the grime of negotiations and power

plays. I sit behind him, fingers already tracing slow circles over his shoulders. I can feel the tightness beneath my hands, knots coiled like snakes, waiting to snap.

“Long day,” I say quietly.

He exhales, a low sound that tells me everything. “Oh, yeah,” he chuckles. “I feel like I’m about to drown in paperwork.”

I smile against his skin, kneading gently as I place a kiss against the back of his neck. “I’m here to throw you a lifeline.”

His breath hitches, and I sense the tension beginning to unwind.

“You were gone a long time,” I say, voice soft but teasing. “How did it go?”

He tilts his head back so I can reach his neck, where the muscles are knotted the worst, and he lets out a soft moan as I hit the right spot, sending shocks right to my cock. It hardens immediately, as it tends to when Vaughn is involved, but I ignore it, knowing now isn’t the time.

“Long. Intense. They through quite the curveball near the end. But I think I have their respect, and they’ve certainly gained mine.

“That’s no small thing.”

“No,” he agrees. “But it’s just the start. I need to call my dad about something before tomorrow, then I need to read over all the

documents again. Then I face them again, hopefully for the final signing."

I lean into the curve of his neck, my lips ghosting over the tense muscle. "You'll nail it."

He shivers under my touch, hand moving to cover mine. "I hope so. There are still too many uncertainties."

I press my palms harder, fingers sliding over the knots, letting the heat from my skin soak into him. "Then I'll be your lucky charm."

A small laugh escapes him. "You're a wild card, Zmejka."

"Good. I like the idea of causing a bit of chaos in your life." I say with a smirk, fingers working magic over his shoulder blades.

He shifts, resting his head back against my shoulder, eyes closed. "Oh trust me, you do that plenty already."

My hands move lower, tracing the line of his collarbone, the ridge of his shoulder.

His breath catches again, and I'm emboldened, lips brushing over his skin, kissing the taut muscles I've just massaged loose. His body melts into mine, the wall he carries for the world crumbling bit by bit.

"Yulian," he breathes, voice thick.

I tilt his chin, leaning my head over his shoulder and using his chin to turn his head toward mine, capturing his mouth with my lips. The kiss starts slow, tentative, a delicate exploration, but the hunger beneath it grows, fierce and demanding.

My hands slide under his shirt, warm skin beneath my fingertips, muscles taut and trembling. He grips my wrists briefly before pulling me closer, the tension between us snapping like a live wire. I trail kisses down his neck, savouring the taste of him, the salt of stress mixing with something deeper. His hands roam over my back, rough and urgent, pulling me flush against him.

We lose ourselves in the moment, a tangle of limbs and whispered breaths, the world outside fading to a dull roar. My lips find the sensitive spots along his shoulders, teasing, nipping, marking. He groans low, hands clutching my hips.

I trail lower, fingers tracing the line of his spine beneath the fabric, pulling at the hem of his shirt. He helps me, lifting it over his head, revealing skin flushed from the day and my touches. I press my body against his bare chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

He captures my mouth again, hands tangling in my hair, pulling me deeper. The heat between us ignites, a slow-burning fire that consumes everything else.

Clothes become a tangle as we shed layers, every touch setting nerves alight as the room becomes smaller, charged with desire, a sanctuary where only we exist.

Our breaths come fast, lips and hands exploring, claiming.

I pin him beneath me, ravaging his neck, voice rough as he groans my name.

He arches into me, hungry for every inch, every moment. The world narrows around us until we know nothing but each other's bodies.

-

"Ah fuck, the foods gone cold."

From the bed, Vaughn groans, voice hoarse. "I'm starving. Fix it."

I shouldn't exactly be surprised, considering how long it's just been left on the side while Vaughn and I had sex. It felt different to anything we've done before, though. It's always been rough, exhilarating, full of pleasure mixed with pain. But this time… it had a level of passion we've never had before.

I liked it.

Vaughn doesn't even open his eyes. Just sprawls there like he owns me, demanding things. And I'm the idiot who always gives in.

I roll my eyes hard enough to strain something, snag the bags, and stalk out into the hall. Downstairs, reception takes them without comment, and within a few minutes, the food is hot again. They smile politely when they hand it back. I don't smile back.

When I return, Vaughn's asleep. Flat on his stomach, one arm curled under the pillow, mouth slightly open, hair sticking to his forehead.

He looks…

God, he looks breakable. That's the problem. That softness under all the steel. The part of him I want to own so completely there's nothing left that isn't mine. The part I'd kill anyone for touching.

I set the bags down quietly and stand there, watching him breathe. My hands itch to shake him awake just to see those sleepy, confused eyes focus on me. So, I do.

"Up," I murmur, voice low but sharp. "You still need to call your father."

He blinks at me blearily, then his gaze catches on the steaming containers. His whole face changes. "It's warm?"

I smirk. "I said I'd fix it, didn't I?"

We settle side by side on the bed, knees brushing, Chinese between us. He hits play on the next Harry Potter movie. We're getting pretty deep into this little movie marathon we've got going on. I eat with one eye on the screen and the other on him, already thinking about the next time I'll have him like before, exhausted, ruined, mine.

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Vaughn

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Rubbing my eyes, I step into the bathroom. I have a little more energy after the very quick power nap I got while Yulian reheated the food, plus from eating it. We've just finished the fifth Harry Potter film, and I can't believe I'm saying this, but they're actually not too bad.

Though, that might just be because I love watching Yulian's expressions while *he* watches it.

Pulling out my phone I go to the contact I've been avoiding the last few hours and press call.

It rings once before he answers.

"Vaughn." His voice is steady, warm but with that edge of business that never really leaves him. "How did it go with the O'Sullivan's' today?"

I lean my back against the back of the door, hearing the very faint movement of Yulian getting ready for bed. "Better than I expected. I think we're right where we need to be. If nothing changes overnight, we can have everything signed tomorrow."

A pause. Then: "You think," he repeats, testing the word. "But not certain?"

"Mostly certain," I admit.

"Mostly," he says again, like it's a puzzle he's turning over in his mind. "And what is it that keeps you from certainty?"

"They added something," I say. "Last minute. Said they appreciate the alliance, they want it, but they want a clause stating it's temporary. That eventually, when things are stable, they want full control back over their organization. We'd part ways on good terms and maybe

form a new agreement later."

There's a silence on the other end, and I can almost hear him thinking. My father's silences aren't like anyone else's are always heavy.

"And if they decide not to make that new agreement?" he asks finally, and I can hear the grit in his jaw as he speaks.

"That's what I thought too," I say. "There's no guarantee. It's a risk. But…" I glance out the window, gulping. "I know I'm not as experienced as you. I don't see everything yet. But I've spent days with these men now. Watched them. Listened. They want this to work, for both of us. I believe they can be trusted, at least enough to take the risk."

"You believe," he says, not as a question, but as a confirmation.

"I do," I tell him. "But I don't think we should give them everything without asking for something in return. If they want the temporary clause, fine, but we include something that makes a new agreement more likely. A safeguard. Leverage we can use if they start to pull away."

Another pause. This one shorter.

"That," he says, "is exactly what I was hoping you'd say."

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. "So you agree?"

“Yes,” he says. “But more than that, Vaughn… you’re wrong.”

I frown. “About?”

“About not being as perceptive as me.” His voice softens, just a fraction, but enough to hit me in the chest. “You see what I see. You’ve been reading people all your life, even when you didn’t realize it. The last few days… you’ve proven you can lead. You’ve made me proud before, but this, this is different.”

I stare at the horizon, at the last strip of fading orange. My throat tightens in a way I don’t want to admit. “Thank you,” I say quietly.

“One day,” he continues, “you’ll be better than me. I know that.”

“I don’t know about better,” I tell him, chuckling nervously.

“I do,” he says simply. “And that’s enough.”

I grip the phone tighter, feeling the old, familiar pull between wanting his approval and wanting to prove I’ve earned it. “I won’t let you down.”

“You haven’t yet,” he says. “And I don’t expect you to start.”

We talk for a while longer, about the finer details, what leverage could look like, how to phrase it so it doesn’t sound like a threat but still leaves us protected. He trusts me to word it myself, which is another thing that lands heavy. Trust from him isn’t given lightly.

When there's nothing left to cover, I hesitate before hanging up. "Dad?"

"Yes?"

"I mean it. Thank you."

I can almost hear his faint smile. "You don't need to thank me, Vaughn. Just keep doing what you're doing."

We say goodbye. The line goes dead.

For a moment I just stand there, the bathroom light shining down on me, phone still in my hand.

It's not often I get to hear him say things like that, not because he doesn't feel them, but because neither of us needs constant reassurance. But when it happens, it stays with me. It settles somewhere deep; the kind of place that doesn't let go.

Tomorrow, I'll walk into that meeting knowing exactly who I am, and exactly whose son I am.

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DAY FOUR

Vaughn

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The restaurant feels quieter than yesterday, but the atmosphere hums with the same intensity. I arrive early, the scent of fresh bread and subtle spices lingers in the air, but none of it reaches me. My mind is locked on what today means, the final decision, the culmination of all the careful planning and sharp conversations.

I spot Conell O'Sullivan and his sons waiting, as usual. They're already seated, spread out around a heavy oak table, their expressions unreadable but composed. No smiles today, just the weight of business.

I approach steadily, folding my jacket over the back of the chair before taking my seat.

"Morning," I say, voice steady, though my pulse beats a little faster than I'd like to admit.

Conell nods, his eyes sharp beneath a furrowed brow. "Morning, Vaughn. We've spent the night reviewing the final proposal."

I nod my head. "As have I."

"I presume you've also had a think about our final request."

I nod again. "I have."

Sitting up, I get ready to start brandishing my ideas for ways to guarantee a future alliance. I've come up with several, as I wouldn't want to assume they'll be happy with my first suggestion.

However, before I can start, Padraig speaks up. “We understand that it’s a big risk for you, agreeing to the alliance eventually being terminated, with no confirmation that another agreement will come from it, other than our word and the hope that this we get along well during this alliance.”

Where is this going?

“So, we would like to make a proposal of our own, a gesture of goodwill, if you like, to show our commitment to ensuring that even if we are not in direct subordination to you, we would like to continue this pact for many, many years to come.”

My eyes narrow, and Padraig pauses, sitting up. “I’d like to add a clause to the contract that, should we struggle to make an agreement after the alliance is finished, I’ll offer myself to marry a member of your organization.”

My jaw drops a little. That wasn’t what I was expecting at all. I know it was something we discussed early on, and I had a talk with Lidya about it, but it wasn’t something I was overly serious about, just suggesting options.

Padraig continues. “Who was it you mentioned before? Your cousin? Lidya? If we struggle or fail altogether to make an agreement that continues our work together, I’m willing to connect our families through marriage. I take the pact of marriage very seriously. After all, I’ve grown up watching my mother and father together. And I’ve already told you how serious and committed they are to one another.”

He nods his head toward his father, who stares back at him with an unrecognisable expression.

“What’s mine is my wife’s. And by extension, her families. Our children will be heir to our empire, and cousins with yours. They’ll grow up together.”

His suggestion is absolutely nothing like what I had come up with. It hadn’t even crossed my mind. But… it is probably the best idea yet.

Not only will our organizations be forced to cooperate through a member of our organization being married to the future leader of theirs, but the next generation will grow up alongside one another as family, close enough that a formal agreement might not even be necessary to keep trade going. Rather, it’ll be discussed over monthly family dinners.

Lidya is timid, but she is a Morozov. She can hold her own when she’s comfortable, and though I don’t love the idea of offering her up like this, it is our best option.

“If I were to accept your offer…” I say, “then it would also have to keep the condition that if she changes her mind, at any moment, for any reason, up until the marriage has gone through, then she is fully within her right to do so. I will not force her.”

Conell nods his head. “Of course.”

I look at Padraig. His eyes appear neutral, at first, but when I look closer, I’d almost say they’re dead. His face is expressionless, not at all like he’s just agreed to marry someone he has never even met.

I can’t help but feel suspicious of the proposal. Yet, I can’t help but admit it’s a brilliant one. I sigh, thinking it over again and again.

The thing is, if it comes down to it, I know Lidya will say yes, for the sake of the family. It's who she is. How she'll cope without her parents, I don't know, but she'll find a way, as she always does.

Finally, I look each of them in the eye.

Then, I nod my head. "Very well, a marriage pact it is."

For a moment, I think I see a slight change in Padraig's eye, but it disappears as soon as it was there.

Cian grins, the tension loosening ever so slightly. "Now let's get this party started."

The conversation moves quickly now, with us going through the minimal remaining points that weren't quite finished yesterday nice and quickly. I stand firm on my core principles but remain flexible where it strengthens the alliance.

We add the marriage pact and finally settle on what we call a 'Four Plus One' deal. It states that the official alliance, in which the Irish will be mostly under our authority, will last four years. At the end of the four years, we will then spend another (the 'Plus One') slowly separating our organizations, at a pace that will ensure nothing is done too quickly, which could cause some issues.

During said 'Plus One' year, we will also start on the agreement to continue working together, despite being entirely separate. Of course, after four years together, we hope that it will be smooth and easy. But, if it isn't, there is a backup plan. The deal states that if no agreement can be reached by the end of the Plus One year, then the marriage

between Padraig O'Sullivan and Lidya Morozova will go through, finally bringing our families together.

It is hoped that even though we won't have a deal, a marriage should hopefully lead to one, eventually.

Of course, it is still only if an agreement can't be reached before then, which we all agree is extremely unlikely. And, it's specified only if Lidya agrees, which she entirely has the right not to.

Finally, we reach the signature page. I pull the pen from my jacket pocket, heart pounding in a different rhythm, anticipation laced with a quiet pride. It's not that I'm nervous, per se, but more that I can't believe what I've managed to achieve in the last few days.

I came here to prove myself, to show what I'm capable of brining to our empire. And I've done it.

Conell picks up his pen, locking eyes with me. "Are you ready?"

I inhale, steadying myself. "More than ready."

One by one, signatures mark the paper. Our alliance, forged in sharp words and firm promises, is now official.

Conell folds the document carefully, setting it aside. "Welcome to the family, Vaughn."

Cian claps a hand on my shoulder, grinning wide. "Let's see if you can

keep up with us."

Padraig smirks. "This is only the beginning."

I rise, the fatigue of the last days settling into my bones, but beneath it is a fierce spark. "We'll exchange more detailed information online. My father and other high-ranking members of the Bratva will also want meetings to be set up so they can get to know you. The real work starts now."

We part with nods and firm handshakes, the first true step toward a future shaped by both our hands.

Outside, the grey sky is softer than before, as if Dublin itself breathes easier. I pull out my phone and call my father.

The line rings twice before his steady voice comes through. "So?"

I manage a smile I know he can't see. "We made it."

"I knew you would," he says quietly, pride plain in every word. "What did you agree on as the guarantee?"

I hesitate, before explaining the Four Plus One deal, and the role Lidya will play.

"Well…" he sighs, "I can't say it's not a great idea."

I chuckle a little, but it's slightly forced.

"Though," he speaks, "I don't look forward to facing your uncle's wrath when we tell him."

I wince a little at just the idea. Lidya is his pride and joy. His precious princess. Oh yeah, he's not going to approve. But that's for another time.

"You've stepped up, Vaughn. Leading as you should."

I close my eyes, letting the moment wash over me, the weight of expectation, the sting of relief, the promise of what's to come.

"Thank you, Dad. It's just the start."

He chuckles softly. "Every empire starts somewhere. Keep building."

"I will."

I end the call and look out at the city again. The deal is done. The path ahead is clear. And for the first time in a long time, I feel ready.

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Yulian

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I'm slouched on the bed, half-draped over Vaughn like a lazy cat, pizza box open on the bed next to us. Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince plays on the screen in front of us. We've agreed to finish the series before we head back to Brighton Island, as a final end to our trip.

Despite it being only four days, it feels like a lifetime.

The flickering light paints everything in soft shadows, giving the room a cozy, almost sacred feeling. Vaughn looks exhausted, his usual sharpness softened by fatigue, despite him finally accomplishing his goal. Despite how tired he was, he barely slept last night as he was too busy thinking about today.

His suit jacket hangs off a chair, tie tossed carelessly aside. There's a weariness to him that makes my chest tighten. I want to protect him, hold him steady, keep him safe from all the weight he drags around like armour.

The scene on the screen shifts to the Cliffs of Moher. The camera pans over the jagged cliffs plunging into the churning Atlantic below, waves crashing with a wild, relentless energy that feels like a heartbeat of Ireland itself. Harry and Dumbledore stand at the edge, the wind whipping Harry's hair. There's something breathtaking about the place, raw, untamed, and beautiful in a way that makes you feel small and infinite all at once.

I nudge Vaughn gently with my elbow, nodding toward the screen. "That's the Moher Cliffs, you know. Not far from here, if you squint really hard."

He hums, eyes not leaving the screen. "Of course you know that, Potterhead."

“Shut up. Half-Blood Prince is the best in the series.”

“Sure,” Vaughn rolls his eyes. He glances again around the screen, observing the cliffs. “Looks… peaceful.”

I’m not sure about that, considering how violently the water is sloshing around, but sure.

I grin, a little mischievous. “It’s a damn shame we’re stuck on the other side of the country.”

He shrugs, voice low and tired. “Yeah. We’ve got responsibilities to get back to.”

I’m about to agree, about to say that deals and negotiations don’t wait for ideal moments or scenic detours. But then, something shifts.

Without warning, without any build-up or hesitation, Vaughn sits up and blurts out, “Let’s go.”

I freeze, pizza halfway to my mouth. “Wait. What?”

“Let’s just… go,” he repeats, voice calm but firm, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “Rent a car. Drive out there. Now.”

I blink, incredulous. “Really? You’re serious?”

He turns to look at me, eyes sharp despite the fatigue. “Yeah. Why not?”

I can barely process this. Vaughn, the guy who plans every second, who thrives on order and control, who gets angsty about last-minute changes, wants to just pick up and go on a spontaneous trip to the Cliffs of Moher. My heart stutters, and suddenly everything feels electric.

I laugh, disbelief bubbling up. “You’re full of surprises.”

He smirks, the kind of small, satisfied smile that tells me he’s quietly proud of himself for breaking his own rules. “Maybe. But perhaps that’s what we need.”

I grab the pizza box and set it aside, suddenly wide awake. “Alright, then. Let’s do this.”

-

We’re out the door in less than half an hour, bags packed, jackets over our arms and shoes on. We check out of the hotel and make our way to a car rental place not far from the hotel.

Vaughn’s efficiency kicks in immediately, he pulls up the rental websites on his phone with that familiar focused look, eyes scanning options like he’s picking weapons for a battle. I watch, amused and impressed.

We find a car quickly and the agent hands over the keys with a raised eyebrow, clearly sensing our sudden urgency. I’m practically buzzing

with excitement, already imagining the wind whipping through the windows, the endless road stretching ahead.

Vaughn loads the bags with that careful precision of his, double-checking everything like we're defusing a bomb. I lean back against the wall, soaking in the surreal feeling of it all, this ridiculous, spontaneous adventure that we're about to embark on.

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We're crammed into the small rental car, the air thick with the scent of him and the hum of the engine. I'm behind the wheel, and the city dissolves in the rearview, swallowed by the emptiness of the open road.

Fields sprawl on either side, lush and endless, but all I see is him. Always him.

My hand leaves the steering wheel, sliding onto his thigh. It's not a request, it's a claim. His muscles tense at first, then loosen, and I can feel the easy surrender in that small shift. He doesn't even realize how much I notice. How much I *always* notice.

"Not used to this, are you?" My voice is low, curling in the space between us like smoke. He doesn't look at me, eyes on the road ahead. "What? Driving?"

"No." My fingers press into him just enough to remind him they're there. "Letting go. Being *spontaneous*."

His jaw tightens. "Yeah, well. There's a reason you're the chaos in this

relationship.”

A faint smile pulls at my mouth. “Relationship?”

Vaughn tenses up, like he hadn’t mean to say that, but he chooses to own it, shrugging his shoulders and saying “well, that is what this is, isn’t it?”

I grin at him, my hand trailing further up his thigh. “That is exactly what this is, Mishka.”

I catch the exhaustion shadowing his face, the faint hollows under his eyes. I tell him to rest, though what I really mean is: close your eyes so I can watch you without the pretence of looking away.

Outside, the world moves in quiet stretches, fields dotted with sheep, the occasional flicker of sunlight through the clouds. One large sheep stares as we pass, and for a moment I imagine tearing through the fence just to scatter them, just to make something run.

I make a low, mocking sound in the sheep’s direction.

Vaughn chuckles, shaking his head. “You’re ridiculous.”

“You think so?” I murmur, eyes lingering on him far longer than the road. “You haven’t seen anything yet.”

-

An hour later, Vaughn's been sleeping for a while, slumped in the passenger seat, mouth parted slightly, head tilted toward me like he knows exactly who he belongs to. I've kept my eyes on the road, but every so often I let them stray, watching his chest rise and fall, memorising the exact rhythm. He's peaceful like this. Mine like this.

We round a bend and a cluster of cows drift lazily into the middle of the narrow country road. I slam the brakes. The tyres scream, the car jolts, and we stop inches from a hulking bull whose heavy, dark eyes fix on us like a warning.

Vaughn startles awake with a sharp breath, the sound like a small wound opening in my chest. He rubs his eyes, dazed, confusion still clinging to him. I murmur, "Sorry, Mishka." But I'm not. Not really. There's a sick, curling satisfaction in having yanked him so abruptly from that peaceful dreamland. As much as I enjoyed watching his sleeping face, I've been alone in my head too long, and I wanted him back here, with me.

The bull snorts, stomping a hoof, and Vaughn gives a low, breathless laugh. "Looks like we've got an audience."

My hands tighten on the wheel. I ease the car forward slowly, my eyes flicking between Vaughn and the bull. Only when it finally lumbers away, tail flicking like it couldn't care less, do I let the tension bleed from my grip.

"Ireland's version of roadblocks," I mutter.

Vaughn smiles faintly. "Remind me never to anger the livestock."

I glance at him, at the faint red crease on his cheek from where he'd

been pressed against the seat, then I place my hand back on his thigh.

-

We roll into a petrol station that looks like it hasn't been touched since the seventies. The paint is dull and scabbed over with years of neglect, windows streaked with grime that the rain never managed to rinse away. A crooked sign leans forward as if it's about to give up, its peeling letters promising "Hot Pies & Fresh Tea" like some half-forgotten joke.

Vaughn kills the engine. He stretches, arms above his head, shirt pulling up just enough to expose a narrow strip of skin over his hip. My eyes catch on, unashamed, even as Vaughn gives me a deadpan look as he catches me staring.

We've been in this car for hours, too close, and it's getting harder to keep my thoughts in check. Harder to remember where the line is.

"Come on," he says, already stepping out. I linger, watching him walk toward the shop. His ass sways perfectly as he moves. He doesn't notice the way people look at him. Or maybe he does, but he doesn't care. Either way, I don't like it.

The shop inside smells faintly of dampness and something fried too long ago. The shelves are crammed with crisps and biscuits, their packaging faded, edges curling like they've been here forever. I get two coffees from a machine that looks like it should be condemned. The liquid that pours out is thick, smelling burnt, almost bitter enough to make my teeth ache.

Vaughn appears beside me, muttering about expiry dates. His hair is ruffled from the wind, and I have the sudden urge to smooth it down,

followed immediately by the thought of fisting my hand in it instead.

“They’ve got pies,” I say.

His eyes cut to me, sharp. “We’re not eating petrol station pies, Yulian.”

“Why not? Cultural experience.”

“Or food poisoning.”

We end up with shortbread. He takes the driver’s seat now, his hand finding my thigh as naturally as breathing. Like he’s reminding me I’m still here. Like I could be anywhere else. My pulse jumps, but I don’t move his hand.

I drink the coffee, it tastes like ash, then I watch him pull us back onto the road. The sky is clearing, pale blue spilling between the clouds. But all I see is his reflection in the glass, and the way my chest tightens at the thought of him ever letting go.

-

Somewhere past a row of sleepy farmhouses, Vaughn turns on the radio. The reception is patchy, static crackling between songs, but it’s enough to keep us entertained. A cheesy eighties ballad comes on, and I immediately start singing along, loudly, badly, with zero shame.

Vaughn glances over, biting back a smile. “You’re tone-deaf.”

“I’m soulful,” I correct, belting out the chorus even more dramatically.

“Painfully soulful,” he mutters, but I see the corner of his mouth twitching.

Between songs, the conversation drifts. He tells me about his father teaching him to drive on back roads in the outskirts of New York, about getting the car stuck in a ditch once and pretending the steering had failed, and how his dad absolutely didn’t believe him.

I tell him about sneaking out of the house and into concerts as a teenager, how I’d wedge myself into the crowd and pretend to know every song. The stories pile up like the scenery outside wth rolling fields, distant sheep, the occasional startled cow watching us pass.

His hand never leaves my thigh.

-

We pull into a lay-by overlooking a valley. The grass stretches for miles, dotted with white flecks of grazing sheep, the whole landscape shining faintly under the sun that’s beginning to set. We aren’t far now. Vaughn leans against the bonnet while I take a moment just to breathe in the clean air. It smells of grass, faintly sweet, with a hint of the ocean somewhere far off.

“You’re staring,” he says after a minute.

“At the view,” I lie, even though the way the light hits his profile is doing things to me I don’t want to examine too closely.

He glances over, one eyebrow raised. “Sure.”

I grin and wander closer, close enough that our arms brush. The air is too still now, the wind hushed, as if it knows something is about to happen. There’s a softness in his face, unguarded, exposed, and it makes something predatory unfurl in my chest.

I lean in, because I can’t not. Our lips meet hard, all heat and teeth, and his back hits the hood. The metal hums beneath us, the same way it did that first night, when I learned exactly how to make him come undone. But this isn’t just a kiss, it’s a reminder. That no matter where we go, or how high the mountain, he’ll always end up here.

With me.

Where he belongs.

-

The terrain starts to change as we get closer. The fields give way to rougher ground, the wind picking up enough to ruffle Vaughn’s hair through the open window. I can smell salt now, sharp and bracing.

“Almost there,” he says.

-

Vaughn

-

The gravel crunches softly beneath my boots as Yulian and I slip through the narrow, half-hidden path that leads to the edge of the Moher Cliffs. It's just past golden hour; the sky painted in sweeping streaks of amber and rose. The air is brisk, sharp with that clean, salty bite only the sea can offer in early spring, and it rushes at me, tousling my hair and tugging at my jacket.

Yulian moves quietly beside me, a steady shadow in the fading light. We haven't spoken much since we climbed the final slope, but I don't mind. Words feel unnecessary here, swallowed by the vastness around us.

When we reach the edge, the world opens wide. The cliffs fall away in jagged tiers, a monumental wall of ancient stone carved by time and tide. Below, the waves crash, white foam exploding against dark rocks, the sound roaring in my ears like a living heartbeat. I crouch, fingers tracing the rough texture of the rock beneath me, grounding myself in this moment.

Yulian settles next to me, his presence warm despite the chill. His breath puffs softly in the cool air, mingling with mine. Eventually, he sits down completely, despite the wet grass, looking out into the Atlantic. I don't hesitate to take a seat between his spread legs, my back to his chest.

The sky deepens, colours melting into one another. The sun hovers low now, a glowing ember about to slip beneath the horizon. We watch in silence, the kind of silence that's comfortable and full, a language of its own.

“Zmejka,” my voice is quiet, almost a whisper, and I’d be surprised if he could even hear it over the sound of the waves crashing. “I’m glad you’re here.”

I turn to look at him. The light catches his eyes, those sharp, calculating eyes I’ve come to know so well. “Me too,” he replies, voice barely more than breath.

He shifts closer, and his chin rests on my shoulder. I feel the electricity there, the raw, simmering energy between us that’s been growing since the day we met. There’s so much left unsaid, words trembling just beneath the surface.

I feel the way his body presses against mine, the wind hitting my face. I can smell the salt in the air and see the beautiful views ahead. Yulian’s arm comes to rest around my waist. It’s grounding.

And suddenly, I feel like I need to say something, confess, even. I don’t know what, exactly, but I open my mouth and just start talking.

“I spent years thinking about hurting you. Getting my revenge,” I tell him, and I feel him freeze around me.

“Not just hurting, but ruining. I wanted to take everything from you the way you took everything from me. I imagined my hands around your throat more times than I can count, pictured the light leaving your eyes, slow. That hate kept me alive. It gave me something sharp to hold onto when the walls closed in and the air felt too thick to breathe.”

I sigh, closing my eyes. “But here’s the part I never say out loud, the part that makes me sick to even think about. It wasn’t just hate. It was you. Always you. Your face, your voice. I’d lie there in the dark, and

my mind would drag me back to every message you would send me. It would go back to the basement. Every time you'd talked to me, touched me. And I hated myself for remembering. I hated you for making me remember."

Yulian's head turns and he buries his nose in my neck.

"You were a sickness I couldn't cut out. I'd tell myself I wanted to hear your voice so I could spit venom back at it, but the truth? The truth was I just wanted to hear it. Even if you were lying. Even if you were breaking me all over again. I would've listened until my ears bled. And the worst thing was, the thing that really rotted me from the inside, is that no one has ever made me feel the way you do."

Yulian kisses gently at my collarbone, allowing me to continue. "No one. Not before. Not after. You're not just under my skin, Yulian, you *are* my skin. I don't know where you end and I begin, and I don't think I want to.

"Every time I think I've found a way out, I turn my head and it's you standing there. Not even in the flesh. Just in my head. Smirking. Waiting. Like you know I'll crawl back. And I do. Every single time. I would tell myself I hate you, but it was simply a lie I had to tell myself to survive.

"Maybe I am sick. Maybe you made me that way. Or maybe you're the only thing that's ever felt real. I think about the years we lost. All the time. I think about what I could've done, who I could've been if you hadn't… if *we* hadn't been what we are. And it kills me. But it also makes me want to take what's left and keep it until there's nothing else.

"I don't want to waste another second. I want to spend whatever time I've got left clawing it all back. Every moment he took from us. Every

look I never gave you. Every word I never said. I want to make up for it in ways you won't be able to forget, even if you tried. I want to burn myself into you so deep that even if you walk away, you'll still feel me.

"I don't know if that's love or just another kind of hate. But it's mine. And it's yours. And it's never going away. Not now. Not ever."

I can feel it on the tip of my tongue. Those three words, that could change everything, or nothing. I feel them, it's something I can't deny anymore. But something stops me from truly going over that edge.

As I'm considering how I might force the words out, what they might do, I find myself flipped over onto my back, lying on the wet grass, as droplets of water splash up onto us from below.

Yulian climbs over me until his face is right on top of mine, and he just stares at me. Out of the corner of my eye, I see the pink and yellow skyline as the sun slowly gets lower and lower.

Finally, Yulian opens his mouth.

"The first time I saw you, Vaughn… in that cold basement, you were like a ghost, something untouchable, something that shouldn't have been real. And yet, I wanted you. Not just to hold, not just to love… but to possess. To consume."

"A bitter smile flickers across his lips. "At first, I didn't understand what it was. It wasn't love, at least not how people pretend to know it. It was hunger, a raw, aching need that clawed at my insides and wouldn't let go. Every moment since then has been a slow burn. Obsession, yeah, that's what it started as. But it grew, twisted into something deeper. Something… darker."

He reaches out, his fingers tracing the line of his jaw, deliberately slow, savouring the heat beneath my skin. “I’ve watched you. Watched you like a predator stalks its prey, memorizing every detail, the way your pulse flickers under my touch, the sharp catch in your breath when I cross the line between pain and pleasure.” His voice dips lower, a whisper only for me. “You don’t see it, but I do. I see how you burn for it, for me. For what we are.”

He pulls back just enough to meet my gaze, intense and unblinking. “People would call this madness. Call it unhealthy, dangerous. They don’t understand because they’ve never been tethered to something so absolute, so devastatingly consuming.”

My thumb brushes over his lips, soft, then pressing. “This isn’t some fairy tale, Vaughn. This is the kind of love that leaves scars, both seen and unseen.”

And there is that word. The one I’ve been too scared to say. It’s not accompanied by the other two that would make it feel so goddamn different, but it’s there, it’s real, and Yulian said it.

I swallow hard as he continues. “Maybe it’s wrong. Maybe it’s toxic. But it’s ours. And I don’t care if the world thinks it’s sick because I know what it means to want someone this completely, to ache for them like a wound that won’t heal.”

He leans in, breath hot against my ear, “I want you, every inch, every whispered breath, every desperate moment where control slips through your fingers and you fall into me.”

My hands tighten around his face, steady, fierce. “I’m not here to make you safe, Vaughn. I’m here to claim you, break you, build you

back the way only I can. I don't know what tomorrow holds. The future's a dark, twisting road, but this, us, I'm certain. I'm sure beyond the edges of sanity. You're mine. And I'll own every broken piece of you, every shadow you hide, because I've been waiting for you in that darkness all my life."

Those three words still don't come, but I don't need them to. Because I can feel them, deep inside me, both from myself, and from him.

And as the sun sets above us, the sound of crashing waves below, and the wind howling everywhere, I gaze up into his eyes, I know that I am utterly consumed by Yulian Dimitriev.

I grab him by the back of the head and pull him down into a deep kiss.

Chapter End Notes

> i really hope you guys enjoyed the ireland trip. while obviously it was a major point in their developing relationship, i also wanted to focus a lot on vaughns position as future pakhan. we know that he hasnt always felt great about it as he doesnt feel he can live up to his fathers legacy, so i wanted this to be a way of him not only proving to those around him, but to himself, that he is more than capable. obviously i also had some other characters who i wrote for it.
> if you have any questions etc, feel free to message me or send me an ask on tumblr (@lucsf19).
> thank you for all the support, it means the world <3

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Notes

> hi guys, sorry this took so much longer than usual. it was my birthday and so i had quite a bit going on.
> hope you all enjoy :).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vaughn

-

The cottage is silent when we step inside and my shoulders ache under the weight of the bag slung over me. My skin feels like it's been coated in a film of sweat, cheap soap, and exhaustion.

"God," I mutter, toeing off my shoes. "I'm in desperate need of a shower."

We only just arrived back in the UK. We got off the plane and came straight here to relax a bit before going back to our respective friends. I have no doubt news of my achievement in Ireland is being spread, so I'm sure the other Heathens will have something to say about it.

Yulian drops his bag on the floor with a careless thud, his gaze already on me, sharp and alive in a way that makes me feel like I'm on top of the world. I feel like I climbed up here as I climbed those cliffs and just never came back down.

Every moment with him feels like a high I never want to end. His mouth quirks, a slow curve that doesn't look innocent for a second.

“I could say the same,” he drawls, stepping closer. “We could conserve water, you know.” His voice dips, threaded with mock sincerity that doesn’t even attempt to hide what he’s really suggesting. “Shower together. Make it a joint effort, for the environment’s sake.”

Normally, I’d roll my eyes, maybe throw something back at him just to rile him up. But I’m too tired to pretend, and there’s a part of me, dark and coiled, that wants to see what happens if I don’t pull away. So I meet his gaze and match the curve of his mouth with one of my own.

“Fine,” I say, my tone deliberate. “Join me.”

For a heartbeat, something flickers in his expression, surprise, then something hungrier that sharpens his features. He recovers quickly, of course, because Yulian never lets himself lose footing for long. But I see it. I file it away.

He closes the gap between us in two unhurried steps, tilting his head like he’s trying to figure out whether I’m serious or about to set him on fire. “Careful, Vaughn,” he murmurs, voice curling around my name like smoke. “Say things like that and I might start believing you actually want me here.”

“Then believe it,” I say, and then lean in.

The first kiss is almost lazy, his lips warm against mine, but it shifts in a breath, his hand is in my hair, pulling just enough to make me feel it, his other hand already skating down my spine. I backpedal blindly toward the bathroom, the sound of our mouths meeting filling the space between us.

He laughs against me, low and dark. “You have no idea how hot you are. How badly I want you,” he says, not like a confession but a claim.

“So receptive to me, so willing to be mine.”

By the time we reach the bathroom, we’re half-undressed without realizing it - his jacket gone, my shirt hanging off one shoulder. He kicks the door shut, and the small space instantly feels too hot, too tight. My hands are under his shirt, dragging it over his head, his own fingers tugging at my belt.

The sound of the shower starting fills the room, steam already curling against the glass.

We step inside together, the water flooding over us, plastering my hair to my head and running down his sharp cheekbones. His hands are on me instantly, not just touching but claiming, soap sliding over my skin as if he’s memorizing the shape of me through the lather. I return the favour, dragging my palms over his chest, down his stomach, slow enough to make his breath hitch.

There’s a moment, fleeting, where it’s almost tender. The heat, the sound of the water, his thumb brushing over my jaw. Then it shifts. The look in his eyes darkens, his grip on my hip tightens, and the air between us goes from warm to dangerous.

I let it.

When it finally feels like his hands have memorised every inch of my body, he grabs me roughly by the hips, spinning me around and pushing me against the glass door. His head leans forward and down, placing his lips right beside my ear.

“You’ve done such a good job these last few days, baby. It’s been so hot watching you be the amazing leader you are. And that deal you managed to secure for the Bratva…”

His teeth nip over my neck between kisses, licking up the running water and leftover soapy particles coating my skin. “Well… I think you deserve a reward, don’t you?”

A soft moan unwillingly leaves my lips, feelings his hard cock press against my back. I try to reach around to grab him, any of him, but Yulian doesn’t let me, instead grabbing my wrist and yanking my arm above my head.

He grabs my other one too, forcing it up high as well. Then, he grabs me by the hips and pulls my lower half backward, so that I’m arching toward him, with my upper half still pressed against the glass, leaning on my arms above my head.

With my ass jutting out toward him, he gropes me, running his hands over my cheeks, grabbing and pulling them. Then, he leans back toward me, back to my ear and whispers “keep those hands where they are baby, if they move, you won’t get your prize. No attempts to muffle your moans, either. I want to hear you screaming my name when you come.”

With that, I both hear him and see him in the reflection in the glass, dropping to his knees behind me, grabbing both of my cheeks on the way, pulling them apart and spreading me wide open for him.

Then, he dives in.

Instantly, a choked groan leaves my lips in surprise, as he doesn’t start slow, or gentle. No, he feasts on me like a starving man, licking over my hole, kissing at it as fast as he dares. With my hands above my head, there is no way for me to stop the noises leaving my mouth.

His hands start gripping either side of my hips, holding me in place, pulling me toward his mouth. I know there will be bruises there later, and just the idea makes this whole thing even hotter.

My entire body tingles with pleasure as slurping noises surround us, wet, dirty noises telling exactly what he's doing to me. Half of me wants to beg for mercy, but the other half can't get enough.

My mind starts to go blank as all I can think is *YulianYulianYulian*. His tongue starts prodding at my hole, before pushing inside.

"Fuck!" I yell, my hands instinctively reaching down to my cock. However, the moment they dip below my head, Yulian pulls away completely.

I gasp brokenly at the loss of contact. "Yulian, *Zmejka*, please. Fuck, please, please, please."

Yulian grins up at me savagely. "I thought I gave you a rule, Mishka. But you broke it, didn't you?"

"I'm sorry," I whimper, immediately reaching above my head again and putting my arms back in their original position, "I won't do it again, I swear, just please, Zmejka, I need you so bad."

Yulian relaxes back on his heels casually, pondering. "Hm… And what is it you *need* from me, baby?"

"Need you to make me cum," I beg.

Yulian chuckles, leaning forward to bite hard on my ass cheek, hard enough that there's probably an outline of his teeth on there. I groan, my hips twitching and my cock throbbing against my stomach. "And how exactly do you want me to do that?" he says when he pulls back.

"You-your mouth," I stutter, "I need your mouth on me."

"And where exactly, do you want my mouth?"

"Where-where it was before. Please Yulian, please."

Shaking his head, Yulian smirks. "I'm going to need you to be more specific baby. Where do you want my mouth?"

I grunt in frustration, my vision going blurry. "In me," I plead, "I need your tongue in my ass, please, Yulian, please. I need to cum. Make me cum."

Without a word, Yulian leans forward again, quickly, and licks long swipe over my hole. I practically scream as Yulian says "well, you should have just said that then, baby."

Then he ruins me. He takes me apart piece by piece, as his tongue finds it's way back into my hole, and I have to grip my fists tight, digging my nails into my palms to keep them in place. There is no attempt to hold back my sounds of pleasure, and it's a good thing we're in the middle of the woods, as otherwise I'd be worried half the island could hear me.

Yulian is a large man, and his tongue is no different. It reaches deep inside me, not as deep as his cock, of course, but deep enough that

eventually, after minutes of probing around and thrusting in and out of me, it finds that special spot inside me that makes me see stars.

"Yulian, Yulian, Yulian," I chant, over and over, my eyes squeezed shut and head thrown back as I chase my rapidly approaching orgasm.

My cock is nearly painful between my legs from lack of attention, and as if feeling my desperation, Yulian removes one hand from my hip and reaches around to grip my dick, sliding his fist up and down it.

A broken sob leaves my mouth as he does, and I'm so, *so* close to my release. He continues for a minute or so, until I'm finally on the brink of my orgasm, my breaths short and rapid and-

Yulian removes his hand from my cock and leans back once again. Tears finally leak from my eyes, dripping down my face as I instantly begin begging for him to continue. Didn't he say this was my reward? I was *so* good and now I need him to give me my prize.

"Please Yulian, please. I need you so bad. I need you to make me cum."

He nips at my cheek again. "You're going to cum on just my tongue, or not at all, Mishka."

Then he dives back in, hand no longer on my cock. I groan, thinking there is no way I'll be able to come from just his tongue alone. I need the fisting of my cock too. Yet, as Yulian continues, I feel myself approaching my release once again.

I'm sure my dick must be almost purple by now from desperation.

“Zmejka, oh fuck, Zmejka,” I moan and Yulian hums appreciatively. His tongue vibrates from it inside me, setting my entire body on fire, thrusting so fast my head can’t stop spinning, and, finally, it sends me over the edge.

My entire vision goes white, my legs tremble, and I’m pretty sure I scream Yulian’s name as loud as I can. His tight grip on me is the only thing keeping me on my feet, I’m pretty sure, as his tongue doesn’t pause or falter, even for a moment, as it continues to fuck me through my orgasm.

I don’t think I’ve ever cum this hard in my life. My semen coats the shower door in front of me as I gasp for breath, my vision and hearing gradually returning to normal. My knees buckle, then, and Yulian finally pulls his tongue from inside me, leaving me feeling empty.

He catches me as I fall, lowering me down to the shower floor as he, too, leans back against the glass behind us. Then, he manhandles me until I sit between his legs, eyes still closed, with my head leaning against his collarbone.

My body keeps trembling and shaking, small quivers shooting through me every minute or so. Finally, I feel Yulian’s warm, deep breath against my ear. “Did you like your reward, Mishka?”

I barely have the strength to nod, but I do. “Yeah,” my voice comes out croaky and rough, exhausted from all the screaming. Yulian relaxes against the shower wall, allowing me to relax against his chest. One hand comes up to stroke through my hair, as several kisses are pressed against my forehead.

We sit for a while, and eventually I attempt to grab his cock, which is still half-hard between his legs, but he refuses, telling me it wouldn’t be much of a reward if I returned the favour.

I'm not sure how long we sit there, under the warm spray, in each other's arms, breathing heavily. But after some time, Yulian lifts me, half asleep in his arms, and carries me to the bedroom. He places me on the bed and climbs in beside me, manoeuvring me so I'm lying on his chest, my head tucked into his neck.

In this position, we drift off, comfortable in one another's embrace.

-

The engine's low growl is a steady pulse beneath me, vibrating up through my legs and into my chest. My hands are steady on the handlebars, leather gloves creaking faintly as I lean into the turn, the wind slicing past my ears with a sharpness that feels almost cleansing.

It's strange. A few months ago, I felt like I was straddling two cliffs with nothing but open air between them, one foot in control, the other dangling over chaos. Now, it feels different. Yulian and I… we've slipped into something that's almost comfortable. Not easy, nothing about him is ever easy, but solid. I don't second-guess his presence the way I used to. I don't feel the same edge of suspicion when his hand finds mine.

Instead, there's a confidence building in me I didn't expect, like I'm learning to stand with him, not just tolerate his orbit. When I was stood on the Mohor Cliffs with him, it was like I was somehow simultaneously in more control than ever before, yet also, was completely at ease with the idea of not having any at all, so long as I had Yulian with me.

But comfort isn't the same thing as safety. I'm not about to announce to the world that we're together, not because I'm ashamed, but

because there are too many other things going on in our world still. My dad taught me to play my cards close, and this… this is a card I'm not ready to lay down just yet.

That doesn't mean I'm hiding from myself anymore. If anything, I feel more ready than I've ever been to say it out loud, to own what I am without flinching. Bisexual. Bratva Heir. And if anyone has a problem with that, they can choke on it.

Okay, well, maybe not *completely* out loud, and maybe not to just *anyone*. But to my friends, perhaps.

I think about my conversation with Gareth, about my consideration of speaking with Nikolai, who not only might have good advice due to our similar situations, but who also simply deserves the truth because he's my lifelong friend and confident. Nikolai's not just a fellow Bratva heir; he's family.

The closer I get to the mansion, the more certain I am.

When I eventually climb off my bike and walk inside, the smell of sugar and espresso greets me before the sight does. Sure enough, there's Niko in the kitchen, perched on the counter, a pastel macaron in each hand. There's a plate beside him, half-empty, crumbs scattered like confetti.

As I stroll toward me, Niko turns his head, sensing my presence, and when he spots who it is, his face lights up.

"V!" Niko's voice calls loudly. He's grinning as he quickly stands, closing the gap between us and wrapping me in a tight hug, clapping me on the back. I allow it, despite the powdered sugar I saw on his hands, which is no doubt now covering my jacket. "The Irish? You

fucking did it.”

I nod my head at him, smiling back. As the youngest, sometimes it feels like I’m trying to catch up with the rest of the Heathens, even if I will be their leader one day. So, it feels good to know I’ve accomplished something so big, and hear their praise for it. “I did.”

Niko pulls back just far enough to lean against the table, arms crossed but still vibrating with that reckless pride. “You’ve set the bar too high for the rest of us now.”

“I’m sure we’ll all do great things in the years to come, Niko.”

Niko nods his head. “Right you are, V-”

He goes to clap a hand on my shoulder, and while I allowed the hug because it was the first time I saw him, I step back from this one. I think my jacket is dirty enough as it is, without the extra sugar that still somehow covers Niko’s hands.

When he notices what made me take a step back, Niko throws his head back, his long hair falling around his face, laughing. He turns back to the counter, grabbing two more macarons and stuffing both into his mouth.

“Lotus flower gave me these,” he announces before I can even speak, his mouth still full. “Said I deserved them because I’m cute. He’s right, obviously.”

I raise a brow, moving to stand beside him and leaning against the counter. “You’ve eaten half the box already,” I say, nodding my head

to the nearly empty box.

“Correction,” he smirks, popping the rest into his mouth. “I’ve eaten three-quarters. But I have better stamina before I crash when I’m on a sugar high, so Bran will thank me for it later.”

He wiggles his eyebrows suggestively, and I roll my eyes.

There’s that familiar irritation and fondness that always hit me in the same breath when it comes to Niko. He’s erratic, all sharp edges and sharp teeth, but beneath it is this raw hunger for love that Brandon seems to feed without hesitation. He’s ridiculous and violent and obsessive, but he’s also loyal in a way most people will never understand.

I clear my throat. “Niko.”

He looks up, swallowing his mouthful, eyes narrowing at the tone. He can tell instantly this isn’t banter. “What?”

“Can I ask you about something?”

He squints at me like I’ve just suggested a funeral. “That sounds ominous as fuck. You’re not about to tell me you crashed the bike or killed someone important, right? Because if you did, I’ll just go and grab the vodka now.”

I shake my head. “It’s not that.”

His smirk lingers, but there's a flicker of something else underneath. He hears the edge in my voice, the seriousness I can't quite mask. With a dramatic sigh, he takes a proper seat at the counter, gesturing for me to do the same as he brushes crumbs off his jeans. "Fine. Talk. I'm all ears."

I hesitate, the words sticking like glue at the back of my throat. "I've been… figuring myself out lately. A lot, actually."

That gets his attention. His brows knit, head tilting as if he's trying to slot puzzle pieces together faster than I can put them down. "Figuring yourself out?" he repeats, voice cautious in a way I don't hear often.

"Yeah." My hands tighten around the back of a chair, grounding myself. "I've been talking to Gareth a lot. We've been… in similar situations, you could say. With… discovering things."

Niko's eyes flash with something sharp, surprise even. He knows exactly what I'm circling, because we all the know what Gareth has 'discovered' about himself in the last few months.

"You mean…" Niko trails off, blinking at me. Then he lets out a low whistle. "Holy shit. You're actually saying what I think you're saying?"

I swallow hard. "I'm bisexual."

For a beat, silence. Then-

Niko bursts out laughing, loud and unrestrained, tossing his head back like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard. "V, you dramatic bastard. I

thought you were about to tell me you were dying or some shit. You could've just said it, you know."

"I just did," I mutter, though the tension in my chest loosens slightly, almost against my will.

He grins, wicked and sharp. "Congratulations, you're officially less boring. Welcome to the Fun Dick Alliance!"

Despite myself, a laugh escapes. "Thanks, I guess."

"Seriously though." His tone shifts, just enough to let me know he means it. "Good for you. That's huge. And you know you can tell me anything, right? You're basically my kid brother, whether you like it or not. Which means if anyone gives you shit for this, I'll cut their throats and feed them to my dog."

"You don't have a dog," I remind him.

"I'll buy one just for this," Niko snaps back without hesitation.

I shake my head, but there's warmth crawling beneath my ribs despite everything.

Then, of course, he ruins it. His grin turns sly, his eyes gleaming. "So, tell me, is there someone in particular that made you realize this? Some pretty boy catching your eye? Come on, V, give me something."

The blood in my veins turns to ice. Yulian's face flashes in my mind,

his smirk, his chaos, the way he burns into my life like a wildfire I can't put out. Us standing together on the Moher Cliffs, and feeling more consumed by him than I have by anything else in my entire life.

But I also know how Nikolai feels about Yulian, and the shit that will go down when he finds out about us. So, I avoid it, just for now.

"No one," I say calmly, keeping a straight face. "It's just… something I came to on my own."

Niko eyes me for a moment, but then he shrugs. "Fine. Keep your secrets. For now." He winks.

I let out a slow breath and shift gears. "It's not just about me, though. I'm nervous about what it means for my duty. As heir."

That wipes the grin off his face for real this time. He straightens, leaning back against the counter. "Duty? What the fuck does that have to do with who you wanna fuck?"

"It's not that simple," I say, frustration spilling into my tone. "You don't have the same expectations on you, Niko. I do. Producing an heir with my bloodline. Being the face, the representative of everything this family stands for. If I were married to a man, it wouldn't exactly be easy to keep it quiet."

Niko snorts. "Who the fuck cares about keeping it quiet? You think I hide Brandon? I'd set our whole world on fire before I pretended he wasn't mine. You think I care if some old asshole frowns about it? I don't. And neither should you."

“It’s not the same,” I insist. “You don’t carry what I do. You don’t have the weight of the title hanging over your head every second. When I take the seat as pakhan, everything I do, everything I am, will be scrutinized. If I stumble, even a little, it could be seen as weakness.”

Niko’s eyes blaze, sharp and wild. “Then don’t stumble. Own it. If anyone has a problem, kill them. Simple.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “It’s never that simple.”

“Bullshit.” He steps closer, jabbing a finger against my chest. “You’re making it complicated in your head. You’re acting like the world is stacked against you when it isn’t. You’ve got us. Me, Jeremy, Gareth, Killian, we’re the future, V. The old fucks won’t be running this show forever. And when we’re at the top, no one will touch you. No one will stop you. They’ll choke on their own tongues before they dare.”

His words strike something in me, something stubborn, something fierce. I want to believe him. God, I want to. I think about our new allies, and my conversation with Conell, where he admitted he wanted to work with us specifically because he wants to make his world into one where his son can be who he is. I think about how it’s proof that, even if it’s still a little far off, our world is changing in my favour.

“And what about an heir?” I press. “You tell me not to care what people think, but how do I explain not carrying on the bloodline the way they expect?”

Niko waves a hand, exasperated. “Who cares how? Adopt, surrogacy, whatever. The point is, it’s not the obstacle you think it is. You’ll figure it out. The only thing that matters is who you want by your side. That’s the decision you make for yourself. Not for them.”

His words land heavy, like stones in my gut. He's reckless, obsessive, ridiculous, but maybe that's why it rings so true. He doesn't overthink the way I do. He just decides, claims, burns, destroys anything in his way. Maybe there's something in that I need to learn.

I inhale slowly. "Thanks, Niko."

He smirks again, already reaching for another macaron. "Don't thank me, V. Just don't be a coward. And if it's some secret boy you're not telling me about…" He waves the treat like a threat. "I'll find out. Eventually."

Niko's still smirking like he's solved every problem I'll ever have when footsteps echo against the floor. The sound carries before the sight, heavy but easy, familiar in a way I recognize immediately. Gareth and Killian stroll in, side by side.

"Oh look!" he exclaims, loudly. He throws his arms out dramatically, nearly knocking the macaron box off the counter, and his grin splits wide with wild delight. "Now all the members of the Fun Dick Alliance can truly meet!"

I don't even have time to breathe before he's halfway out of his chair, pointing at them like he's presenting guests of honour on some deranged talk show.

Killian pauses in the doorway, brow lifting in mild, amused confusion. "What?" His voice is low, measured, as he glances toward me as he realises that I've, for some reason, been included in the club.

Gareth's face tightens instantly, a flash of panic behind his eyes, the faintest twitch in his jaw. He looks at me, and I can see the gears in his head turning, can see him realizing all at once that I've said

something to Niko, just like I said I would. However, I also see his nerves as he grasps Nikolai's mistake, with Killian here too.

And Niko, to his credit, does realise his mistake immediately, his eyes flashing wide as they dart toward me and then back to Killian. He waves a hand, laugh awkward and too bright. "Just kidding. Jesus, you all look like you swallowed knives. It's just, ugh, I'm bored of all the boring straight people, right?" He jerks his chin toward me; grin plastered back on like it never faltered. "And I miss my fellow dick enjoyers. That's all. Harmless. Nothing serious. Chill."

But I can't help it. I laugh. The sound rolls out before I can stop it, sharp, dry, cutting through the awkward air Niko's scrambling to patch over. And then I shake my head, amused at his attempt but unwilling to let him dig a deeper hole on my behalf.

"It's fine, Niko," I tell him, voice calm but clear, the weight of it pulling the room's attention back to me. "You don't have to cover for me."

His eyes flicker wide for a beat, like he isn't sure what to do or think, leaving me to direct this conversation.

I glance at Killian, meeting his cold, calculating stare head-on. "I'm bisexual."

The words land with the kind of finality that only truth can carry. I don't flinch when I say it. I don't soften it.

Killian studies me for a moment too long, like he's peeling layers back, searching for what else is hidden beneath. His face stays neutral, carved in stone, but there's something behind his eyes, some spark of realization, that makes me wonder just how much he's already pieced

together.

Finally, he nods once, slow, deliberate. “Cool,” he says, tone unreadable, but there’s a glint of calculation there. Something dangerous. Something that makes me think he’s figured out more than I’d like.

Gareth exhales like he’s been holding his breath this entire time. Relief washes over his expression, and he relaxes into an easy grin, pointed at me “Congrats, V,” he says, voice low but genuine. “I’m glad.”

Niko claps his hands together with a sound like a gunshot, tension broken in an instant. “Anyway! Moving the fuck on. Let’s talk about the actual important shit, our boy here fucking aced the Irish deal.” He jabs a finger toward me, smirk stretching across his face. “Seriously, you two, clap for him. Or kneel. Whatever. I don’t care.”

Killian’s mouth twitches up into a smile, moving toward me and clapping me on the back in a quick, tight hug. “I heard,” he says. “Impressive work.”

“Yeah,” Gareth agrees quickly, nodding and doing the same as Killian. “Everyone back home is already talking about it. Congrats, man.”

I incline my head slightly, taking their words with a steady composure that I hope would make my dad proud. “Thank you.”

We gather around the kitchen counter again and it doesn’t take long before the conversation shifts.

“You know,” Gareth grins mischievously, “as someone here once said,

‘I knew it for months, you bitches’. I was the first one V told. Guess we know who his favourite is.”

Nikolai gasps mid-bite through a macaron. “You are not! Besides, it doesn’t change that I knew about *you* first.”

Gareth scrunches up his nose. “Did you though?”

“Uh, yes.” Niko’s hands shoot into the air, his voice pitching higher, dramatic. “I was literally the first person to know about you, Gareth. Don’t rewrite history now just to-”

“Actually,” Gareth cuts in smoothly, eyes glittering as he looks at him, “that’s not true anymore. Because I can finally tell you that V was the first person I told. We… bonded. Over being confused as hell.”

The air goes silent for half a beat, and then Niko gasps like someone’s stabbed him in the chest. He stares between us, jaw dropping, betrayal written all over his face. “You-” His voice cracks as his head swings back and forth between Gareth and I. “You mean to tell me my favourite cousin went behind my back and confided in V before me?!”

“Favourite cousin?” Killian jumps in, frowning at Niko.

“Technically he didn’t know he was confiding in me, actually,” I add, though Niko takes no notice of either of us.

Gareth chuckles, leaning back in his chair like he’s savouring the taste of Niko’s outrage. I allow myself the faintest twitch of a smirk, silent but complicit in the betrayal.

“You sneaky little-” Niko slams his hands down on the table, macarons rattling from the impact. “I can’t believe this. My entire world is shattered. My trust, obliterated. I’m going to tell Bran.”

Gareth gives him a deadpan look. “I’m terrified.”

The room breaks into laughter, aside from Nikolai himself, of course, who continues grumbling under his breath about betrayal.

He scowls for as long as he can, before our laughter becomes contagious and the corners of his mouth begin twitching, betraying the act. Eventually, he suddenly pauses, head tilting, his expression shifting into realization.

“Wait a fucking second.” His eyes go wide, darting around the table. “Do you idiots realize what this means? Every single one of the Heathens, except Jeremy, is a proud member of the Fun Dick Alliance!”

“I wouldn’t say ‘proud’,” Killian grumbles.

The words hang in the air before bursting into another round of laughter, the weight of the room lighter now, looser.

“Poor Jeremy,” Gareth chuckles. “He’s the boring one now.”

“Tragic, really,” Killian murmurs, his smirk razor thin. “Someone should tell him to step up.”

Niko slams a fist into the table like he's announcing war. "With V gone, he's the only one left in the boring Dick Alliance. Do you think Cecy would agree to a threesome?"

That's when the door creaks open, and Jeremy walks in, hair damp from a shower, expression tired but curious. I really hope that he didn't hear what Nikolai just said, or poor Niko might be the first deceased member of the Fun Dick Alliance.

"What the hell are you all laughing about?" Jeremy asks, looking around at our red faces.

The four of us fall silent instantly, exchanging looks, faces twitching as we try not to burst.

Jeremy frowns. "What?"

That's all it takes.

The laughter explodes out of us, uncontrollable, echoing through the kitchen walls, leaving Jeremy standing there in pure bewilderment, demanding again, sharper this time, "Seriously. What?"

But none of us answer. We can't.

And I feel so much lighter.

-

Yulian

-

It’s been a few days since I got back from Ireland, and the first thing I learned when I walked into the house was that Tati was gone. Paris, apparently. Jessie whisked her off on some sudden trip, a shiny little apology for lying to her. At least, that’s what Tati told me.

I’ll admit, I was a little confused considering last I saw, my sister could barely get out of bed from sadness and now apparently, they’ve gone on an international holiday together. But I know whatever is happening between them is much deeper than my sister is telling me, so I accepted it.

Plus, I made sure that Tati had taken some guards with her first, which she did. I was pretty exhausted from my own trip to argue.

Now she’s finally back. I hear her voice echoing from the entrance, light and bubbling with excitement, and for the first time in days I feel something settle inside me. I go downstairs, spotting her surrounded by several guards holding her many shopping bags that she obviously got in Paris, and the second her eyes find me, she runs into my arms.

We hug tight, like we haven’t seen each other in months instead of days. It’s odd, considering we spent years barely seeing one another while I was at university and she back in Chicago, yet now we spend so much time together, we can’t bare to be apart for even days.

She smells faintly of perfume, something floral she must’ve picked up in France, and when she pulls back, she’s smiling wide.

“Come on, let’s go upstairs,” I say, already wanting the comfort of our own space to breathe, to catch up.

She follows me up, chattering about how exhausting traveling is, and the moment we’re inside my room she practically bounces onto the couch. Then she turns, grinning, and pulls something out of the one bag she took with her.

“I got you something,” she says, holding it up. A simple leather bracelet, engraved in French. *Meilleur frère.* Best brother.

I take it carefully, running my fingers over the words, and my chest feels too tight for how small a gift it is. “I love it,” I tell her honestly. Then guilt creeps in, sharp and immediate. “But I’m sorry. I didn’t get you anything.”

She waves it off like it’s nothing. “That’s okay. I’m sure you were too busy getting that dick from Vaughn to think about shopping.”

“Tati.” My voice comes out sharp, warning, but she just bursts out laughing, practically folding over herself on the couch.

When she calms, she tilts her head at me, more serious. “But… did you have fun?”

Fun. I don’t even know what to call it. I think of the Cliffs of Moher, the salt wind in my lungs, Vaughn’s hands on me, his voice like fire and steel all at once. There isn’t a single word that captures it. My throat closes just trying. So I settle for the truth I *can* manage.

“Yes,” I say quietly. “It was perfect.”

Her whole face lights up, soft with genuine happiness for me, and it makes my chest ache again.

"What about you?" I ask, shifting the focus. "How was Paris?"

Her cheeks flush immediately, and she looks away, fiddling with her sleeve. "Good. Yeah. It was… great."

I raise an eyebrow. She's hiding something. "You know you can tell me anything."

She nods quickly, eyes flicking back to mine. "I know."

I hold her gaze for a moment, waiting, but she doesn't give more. So I just nod once. "Okay."

I slide the bracelet onto my wrist, admiring it as Tati smiles brightly. However, as I'm about to thank her again, my phone rings. I get excited for a moment, thinking it could be Vaughn, but excitement quickly turns to stone as I see who is actually calling.

Father, the screen says. Tati looks over at the phone and I see her smile drop as she too sees the name. "Excuse me," I say, before standing up and leaving the room.

I force my fingers steady as I pick it up, press it to my ear.

“Yulian,” his voice rumbles, deep, deliberate, weighted with the kind of authority that doesn’t need to be raised to command silence. He doesn’t bother with ‘how are you’. “Have you been up to anything lately? Fighting with those heathens again? Going on trips without my knowledge?”

My chest tightens, a flicker of panic tearing through me like ice water poured straight into the veins. He knows. He must know. But I clamp down hard, lock my breathing into an even rhythm, let no fracture slip through my tone.

“Of course not,” I answer smoothly, like the accusation itself is absurd. “Why would you ask that?”

There’s a pause. A silence that stretches, taut and suffocating, while I imagine him on the other end weighing my every syllable, dissecting my voice for tremors. I dig my nails into the arm of the chair, keep my words even.

“Because,” he finally says, like it should be obvious, “I haven’t heard much from you. Nor from the others stationed with you. I expect at least a level of communication between us. Not none at all.”

The coil inside me loosens a fraction, relief washing in sharp and bitter. He hasn’t heard. He’s only testing me. I allow the faintest sigh to bleed into my reply, practiced weariness and dutiful son folded into one.

“I’ve been busy with school,” I say. “You told me to keep my performance clean, and I have. That’s where my focus has been.”

A low hum from him, approval, almost paternal in its weight, though I know better than to mistake it for affection. “Good. Keep it that way.”

The reprieve doesn't last long. His next words land heavy, like stones thrown one after the other into my chest.

"There's a problem. A shipment went missing from the Chicago ports. A valuable one, a lot of our goods were on that freighter. No trace, no message, nothing. I don't have time to chase it up right now, so I want you to handle it. Use whatever people you have. Find out where it went and sort out the rest."

My pulse steadies again, not from calm but from necessity. Orders I can manage. Orders are solid ground. My mind flicks with memories of the basement, of the realisation of what my father truly did to Vaughn, what he lied about. But I bury them down, as I know if I let them out, I won't be able to stop myself.

I swallow once, keep my voice crisp. "Of course, Father. I'll take care of it."

"Good."

The line clicks dead.

I lower the phone slowly, staring at the black screen, the echo of his voice still heavy in the room.

I leave and make my way down the grand staircase and then into the living room, which already has much activity going on.

A group of my guards stand near the far side of the room, alert but chatting to each other in a way that comes with familiarity, while

Mikhail sits on an armchair by the fireplace, sharpening a dagger with almost ritualistic care, the edge glinting sharply in the muted light. Annie is perched at the built-in bar, the soft glow of her laptop illuminating her face, fingers moving fluidly over the keys.

"Yulian," Mikhail greets, his tone gruff but polite, eyes briefly lifting from the blade. "I heard Tati arrived back from Paris. She okay?"

I nod, not wasting time on small talk. "She is. But there's something that needs attention immediately." My voice is controlled, precise, the kind that demands focus and action. "A shipment that set out from Chicago went missing. My father expects me to sort it out. I want you to figure out what happened, and report back to me."

Mikhail's eyes narrow slightly. "Of course, boss. I'll start looking into it."

Before he can stand, Annie leans slightly forward from her perch, smirking with that quiet confidence that always irritates Mikhail. "I'll do it," she says, almost eagerly. "My computer skills will make this a lot faster. I can pull the cameras, cross-check the databases, trace the shipment electronically. You'll have your answer before Mikhail even finishes sharpening that *tiny* dagger of his."

Mikhail freezes, his jaw tightening as he glances at me, then at Annie. "Step back, Annie. This is not your business. Let me handle this. I've been doing this job longer than-"

I cut him off sharply, stepping closer and placing a hand lightly on his shoulder, a restraint and a command in one. "Stop. She's right. Annie will be faster, and more efficient. Let her do it."

Annie's eyes light up, a small grin tugging at her lips as she shoots

Mikhail a smug look. “Thank you, Yulian. I’ll get started immediately and report back as soon as I have anything.” She tucks her laptop under her arm and disappears down the hallway with confident, purposeful steps.

Mikhail’s face is red now, veins visible in his neck, and his hands clench and unclench as though the dagger could suddenly leap from the chair and into action. “Why the hell did you do that?” he grits, barely under control.

I step back, letting the air between us thrum with authority. “Because I said so,” I snap, frustration cutting through my calm. “You serve me. You do not question me, especially not in front of the others. That’s not how this works.”

I look around at the others in the room. “Get out.”

The guards glance at each other uneasily and quickly drift from the room, leaving only Mikhail and me, the weight of our silence hanging heavy, almost suffocating, with the faint metallic tang of his sharpened dagger lingering in the air.

Mikhail finally exhales, clearly struggling to contain his anger. “Whatever,” he mutters. “But I still don’t understand why you’d let her do it instead of me. It’s ridiculous.”

I clench my jaw, forcing my patience into a sharp edge. “I believe she can get it done faster, that is all.” My voice is clipped, no room for argument. Then I step closer, lowering my tone just enough to cut through his stubbornness. “Now, say what you actually want to say, Mikhail. Don’t dance around it.”

He rolls his eyes, shoulders sagging slightly as though I’ve drained

some of his fire, but then he blurts it out anyway, faster than I expect. “I heard that the New York Bratva made a deal with the Irish. Vaughn Morozov himself, in Dublin. In person.”

My heart clenches, jaw tight, and I feel the muscles in my neck knotting as I realize that despite all our care, I’ve been caught. My control over the narrative I wanted to maintain has frayed at the edges. I force a slow inhale. “What about it?” I ask, voice neutral, controlled.

Mikhail scoffs, leaning back slightly, the blade resting now on the floor beside him like an anchor. “We both know damn well,” he says, voice lowering, almost gleeful, “that you and Morozov were together the whole time. You can’t even pretend it didn’t happen.”

I swallow, muscles tight, forcing the words out evenly, “What about it?”

His exasperation grows, his hand snapping into the air as if to physically punctuate his disbelief. “Fucking hell, I can’t believe this. You’re an idiot, Yulian. What are you even doing? Why are you letting this happen? Why are you letting him-”

I cut him off with a sharp, steadying glare, voice low and firm. “You don’t know anything about what’s going on between me and Vaughn. So shut up.”

He freezes, his eyes looking around the room, anywhere but me, and then after a pause, his tone shifts, darker now, pointed, and his eyes finally meet mine. “Well, I think I know that he *doesn’t* know that you killed Camilla.”

I open my mouth, about to slice through him with another sharp

retort, to tell him to shut up again, to remind him that he's only airing what we both already know to be untouchable, that the secret we hold is absolute, Vaughn will never find out. But before the words can leave, a crash echoes through the room, sharp and sudden, and my pulse skips violently.

I see Mikhail's eyes go wide opposite me, his jaw dropping as they focus on something behind me. I spin, and the world completely narrows down to a single point of heat and shock. Time freezes.

Vaughn stands right there, just a few feet from me, staring at me with such raw and absolute betrayal, that I don't even recognise the expression, not even from the basement.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you enjoyed. ill try not to take as long as i did last time haha since theres a bit of a cliffhanger lol.
thank you so much for the support as usual <3.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Notes

hi guys, hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vaughn

Thirty minutes earlier…

-

It's been a few days since we arrived back from Ireland now, yet I haven't seen Yulian since the cottage. Sure, we've called, texted, endless threads of words, late-night phone calls that kept me up until my voice went hoarse and my chest ached with wanting, but the truth is, both of us have been busy. School, business, catch-up. Life moves fast when you vanish for a week into another country. But even so, I feel the distance tonight like an ache, a hollow bruise in my ribs. I miss him. Desperately.

I'm sprawled on my bed at the mansion, staring at my phone. My thumb hovers over his name in my contacts for the fifth time in twenty minutes. Finally, I call. It rings, once, twice, three times, and goes to voicemail. I frown, try again. Same thing. My chest tightens. Okay, maybe he's busy. I text instead. Nothing. Another text, yet still nothing. The little bubbles don't appear. No read receipt. Silence.

He's home. I know he's home. He told me earlier today he wasn't going anywhere tonight. My first instinct is to shove the phone away and pretend I don't care, to play it cool the way I always do, but the truth is, I'm restless, buzzing with this horrible energy that won't let me sit still. I need to see him.

I sit up, rub my jaw, and stare at the wall. What the hell am I

supposed to do? Just sit here? Wait for him to decide to answer his phone? No. Absolutely not. The thought of lying here, knowing he's right across the island, that I could reach him if I just… tried a little harder, it's unbearable. And besides, it's not like I haven't broken into his house before. Not like I haven't crawled through that window, desperate for him. Tonight feels no different.

By the time the thought fully forms, I'm already grabbing my helmet. The bike roars beneath me, familiar, grounding, as I weave through the dark streets and out to the quiet edges of his property. Yulian's mansion looms, lit only by the dim glow of the guards' posts and the occasional light in a window. I kill the engine, park where shadows swallow the bike whole and slip into the trees. My body remembers the path, every twist and turn, every blind spot in the guards' patrol. It's muscle memory by now.

I reach the side of the house, heart pounding in my throat. The window to his room stares down at me like it's daring me to try. I smirk, grab the ledge, and haul myself up, my fingers gripping brick and stone, my boots scraping against the wall until I've scaled high enough to swing onto the sill. I push the window open, it's not locked. Of course it isn't. I'm pretty sure Yulian stopped locking it after the first time I used it to break in.

Sliding inside, I land silently, the familiar scent of his cologne clinging to the room wrapping around me. For a second, my chest loosens, until I see the empty bed. No Yulian. No sign of him at all.

I frown, scan the space, half-expecting him to step out of the bathroom with that chaotic grin, some cutting remark already on his tongue. But the silence stretches. He's not here. Which means he's somewhere else in the house.

I hesitate, standing there in the middle of his room, weighing my options. Part of me knows I should probably just wait. He'll come back eventually. But the other part, the reckless, hungry part that's only

grown louder since Ireland, pushes harder. Things between us feel stronger than ever, unshakable. If we could survive all the chaos of the cliffs, the fights, the confessions, then what the hell am I scared of? If he catches me wandering his house, what's the worst that can happen? He'll laugh? He'll scold me? He's done both before. And yet he still lets me in.

Decision made, I slip back toward the door, careful as I move into the hallway. The house feels alive, humming with movement, the shuffle of guards in the distance. I keep low, darting between shadows, every nerve on edge. Voices drift from down the hall, heavy boots stomping, and I flatten myself against the wall just as a group of guards walks past, muttering to each other. They're moving away from the living room, quick, purposeful.

I wait until they're gone, then creep closer, drawn by the faint sound of raised voices. I stop just outside the threshold, press myself against the wall, and peek around the edge.

There, Yulian. Standing in the centre of the room, his posture sharp, coiled like a spring. Across from him stands Mikhail, eyes like steel. My brow furrows. They're arguing, voices clipped, harsh, words spitting between them like sparks from flint. Confusion knots in my stomach. Mikhail is his right hand, his shadow, the one person who's supposed to back him without hesitation. And yet the way they're facing off now, it doesn't seem like they're getting along in the slightest.

I can't step out, not with Mikhail there, so I sit, waiting, listening. Then I hear my own name, and I freeze.

"I heard that the New York Bratva made a deal with the Irish. Vaughn Morozov himself, in Dublin. In person," Mikhail says, and my blood runs cold.

He knows.

I hear Yulian's stoic reply, then Mikhails claim of knowing that we were together in Ireland the whole time. I don't know what to do. Should I step out? It's clear Mikhail already knows about us, so would it be the better option? Or would it only make things worse? Mikhail doesn't exactly sound happy about us being together.

They go back and forth again, with Mikhail insulting Yulian, which angers me greatly. Who the fuck is he to speak to Yulian that way? His future Pakhan. Yulian should put him in the ground just for the way he's speaking right now. But then, I hear Yulian defend me. '*You don't know anything about what's going on between me and Vaughn*' he says, making me smile.

With a surge of confidence, I peak my head around the corner, wanting to have a look. I see Yulian's back, still, yet I also see Mikhail, facing me. His eyes dart around the room, as if avoiding eye contact with Yulian. But, then, for what seems like only a split second, I think Mikhail's eyes land directly on me. I jerk back, holding my breath, ready for Mikhail to expose me.

However, he does no such thing, and when I glance back around the corner again, he's no longer looking toward me, but straight at Yulian, and I smile. *He didn't see me.*

But then, what he says to Yulian, absolutely shatters my smile to pieces.

"Well, I think I know that he *doesn't* know that you killed Camilla."

The world stops.

The syllables hit me like a bullet to the chest. I freeze, breath trapped in my lungs, mind scrambling to process the sentence, to make sense of the pieces, but they don't fit, they can't fit. My pulse roars in my ears, drowning out everything else. I must have misheard. I must have-

But Yulian doesn't deny it. He doesn't laugh it off, doesn't call it ridiculous. He bristles. His silence is as good as a confession, and my stomach lurches.

Killed.

Camilla.

The room tilts around me, like I've been shoved off balance. The floor feels unsteady beneath my feet. Memories crash against each other in my head, her smile, her voice, the years I spent drowning in rage and suspicion, blaming him, never knowing the truth.

My chest splinters. Betrayal burns through me like acid, raw and suffocating. It shouldn't be possible to feel this much, not after everything, not after Ireland, not after he looked at me like I was the only thing he wanted. But I do. And it's worse. So much worse.

I stumble to the side and attempt to grab onto the nearest thing to keep me up. It's a small table against the wall for decoration. But my world is so fuzzy that I miss slightly, causing the table to shake and the vase on top of it to fall and smash.

The loud bang as it breaks barely registers through what feels like me being underwater.

My every nerve screams, every instinct demanding I move toward them, toward *him*. That I demand answers, that I shake him until he explains. But my body won't move. I can only stand there, choking on the revelation, on the sharp edge of the truth that just shattered the ground beneath me.

Again.

How does this happen again? Why can't anyone just ever tell me the truth? People lie and they lie and they lie, over and over and over. How can I ever tell what's real and what's not?

Yulian turns around, I think, facing me, likely taking in the betrayal on face that probably exceeds what I felt even in the basement.

Because while the lie itself might not run as deep, we didn't have almost nine years of time between us back then. I- I'm practically in a relationship with him. I *slept* with him.

All the while, he lied to me and murdered my ex, who I was with for *years*, after being the reason we broke up by having sex with her.

How could he do this to me?

The moment my eyes finally lock with his, everything inside me detonates. I can feel it, the instant surge of white-hot electricity tearing up my spine, short-circuiting thought, burning out reason before it even has the chance to settle. Betrayal. That word isn't big enough for what's inside me. It's not a word anymore, it's a living thing, raw and absolute, scraping claws down the inside of my skull, screaming for release.

And all I see is him. His face, his eyes that don't recognise mine, his mouth parted just enough to show shock but not remorse, never remorse.

"You-" The word tears itself out of my throat, too jagged, too sharp, and then I can't stop. My hands are fists, shaking, nails biting into my palms so hard it feels like skin might split. "You lying, filthy-" My voice cracks apart as the volume spikes, uncontrolled, jagged, almost not human. It isn't me speaking anymore; it's something boiling out of me.

Deep, in the back of my mind, I know what's happening right now, what I'm allowing my mind to descend into. But I have no control. None, at all. Yulian was always my worst trigger, and now he's practically broken the switch.

Yulian's lips part further, something like alarm flickering across his face, but he doesn't step closer. Doesn't step back, either. He just breathes out, slow, deliberate, like he's dealing with some cornered animal that might bite his hand off if he moves wrong.

"Vaughn," he says, steady but soft. Too soft. Like he thinks I'll fold at his gentleness, like I'm still that boy in the basement who would have crawled on bleeding hands just to hear his voice sound that careful.

"Don't- don't say my name," I snarl, the words shredding my throat as they come out. "Don't you fucking dare."

Mikhail shifts behind him, moving forward to stand next to him, looking confused, lips parting to cut in, but Yulian's hand flicks sideways, silencing him without even looking. My chest heaves, breath breaking in and out too fast, each inhale scraping. There's a

tightness crawling across my ribcage like it wants to crush me from the inside out, but it can't get past the fury, can't drown the firestorm already ripping through me.

"You *lied* to me," I spit, voice cracking again, higher, more jagged than I can control. "All that time, every word, every fucking smile, you were just-" I can't even finish it. My arm lashes out before I know I've moved, shoving a chair so hard it clatters over, crashing against the floor with a sound that feels like it punctures straight into my skull. My pulse pounds so loud I can't hear anything else for a moment.

"Vaughn." Yulian again, too steady, too calm, his voice threading through the noise, deliberate. "You're having an IED episode, and I know you know it. You need to calm down. You're spiralling."

"Spiralling?" I whip back to him, chest lurching with the force of the shout. "No, this- this is what you made me. You! You fucked me up, Yulian. You broke me! You let me believe you- you-" My voice stumbles, my throat closing around the words because there's no air left, no room inside me to push them out, but the fury keeps coming, raw and frantic.

Mikhail clears his throat, uncertain. "Yulian-"

"Get out." Yulian doesn't look at him. Doesn't even blink. His voice is low, but iron-wrapped.

There's hesitation. A flicker of indignation on Mikhail's face, his mouth twitching with a protest, but then Yulian finally cuts his gaze sideways, and whatever he sees there slices the resistance out of him. He leaves, muttering under his breath, the door clicking shut with a sound that barely registers over the pounding in my head.

And then it's just me and him.

I shove my hands through my hair, yanking hard enough at the roots that pain lances my scalp, but it's still not enough, not nearly enough to burn out the overload tearing through me. I pace, frantic, too fast, too sharp, like my body can't contain the energy flooding through it, like I'll explode if I stay still for more than a second. My words keep coming, stumbling, broken, spit through clenched teeth.

"You ruined everything. Do you even- do you even fucking realise what you've done? I-" My breath hitches, splinters into a ragged sound, then spikes again with another shout. "I hate you!" The sound rips my throat, half-scream, half-roar, the kind of thing that echoes against walls and makes the air feel too thin. "I hate you more than anyone alive. You've hurt me more than your father ever did!"

He flinches at that. A full body shudder, even. But Yulian still stands there, steady, hands loose at his sides, watching me with a kind of intent that makes my skin crawl. And worse, he's gentle. He takes one step closer, slow, deliberate, like he knows any sudden move will snap me in half.

"You're angry because you still care," he says quietly, "and I know you don't mean that, not really."

Something inside me explodes again at the calmness in his voice, at the audacity of him saying that, here, now. "Shut the fuck up!" I snarl, surging forward before I know it, fists clenched, shoulders shaking, every nerve in me screaming to hit him, to wipe that calmness off his face, to make him feel what's ripping me apart.

My hand jerks upward, trembling with the force of restraint that

doesn't even feel like mine. "I should kill you!" I spit, the words coming out so raw it feels like my throat is bleeding.

His gaze doesn't waver. "You won't."

My arm trembles harder, whole body shaking with it, rage tangling with something else I don't want to name, something weaker, something that stings more than fury. I shove away from him instead, slamming my fist against the wall so hard the pain shoots up my arm, bright and sharp, cutting but not enough, never enough. "Fuck!"

At that, Yulian doesn't hesitate to step forward and grab me by the wrists, holding me in place and not allowing me to cause any more harm to myself. There's strain, frustration edging into his tone when he speaks again. "Vaughn. You can scream and rage as much as you want, but you will not hurt yourself."

He let's go of one of my wrists and grabs me by the throat, forcing my chin up to look me in the eye. "Regardless of what might be going on in your mind right now, you are still mine. And no one is allowed to hurt what is mine, not even you."

For a moment, I see myself slamming my head forwards, right into his. Doing whatever I need to do to escape from his grip, even if it means hurting him, making him bleed. A few months ago, I wouldn't have hesitated to do so.

But now, I can't bring myself to do it. I can't bare to think of causing him any physical pain, no matter how much mental anguish he's caused me. Not after seeing his scars, after remembering his whispers about the bruises his father left on him. The idea of hurting him now only causes me more pain, no matter how much I wish it didn't.

So, instead, I use my full strength to rip myself away from his hold, taking a few steps back.

“Fuck you!” I scream, whipping back toward him, every muscle pulling too tight, my chest heaving, ribs aching with the force of it. “I can’t stop, do you get that? You- you made me like this. You poisoned me. You ruined me!”

My words collapse into another roar, tearing the air apart, but underneath it, I can hear myself breaking. My voice cracks too hard, my breath catching, choking, stumbling out of rhythm until it’s not anger anymore but desperation bleeding through. My knees give, and I drop, back hitting the wall as I slide down, hands clawing through my hair until my scalp screams, pulling and pulling like if I just tear hard enough, maybe the rage will come out with the roots.

Yulian kneels in front of me. Not too close, not touching, just there, his presence pressing against mine. His voice is softer now, still steady, but with a low undercurrent of something heavier. “You’re safe,” he says, and I want to laugh at how absurd it sounds. “You’re safe, Vaughn. Breathe. Just breathe.”

“I- hate you,” I whisper, voice shredded down to nothing, trembling. “I hate you so much.”

“I know.”

I squeeze my eyes shut, tears burning but refusing to fall, breath catching like my lungs have shattered. My whole body shakes, wracked with the weight of something that isn’t fury anymore but grief. The fury drained too fast, leaving this gaping hole in its place, a collapse so sudden it feels like death.

When the sob finally breaks free, I can't hold it back. My chest caves, shoulders shaking with a sound that rips deeper than any scream I've ever made. My hands cover my face, nails dragging against skin, and it pours out of me, ugly, broken, unstoppable. Every insult I threw, every threat, every ounce of hate just crumbles under the weight of this ruin.

Yulian still doesn't touch me. He just stays there, steady, close enough for me to feel the heat of him, close enough for me to hear him breathing in time with mine, deliberately slower, pulling me toward it without forcing.

And all I can do is fall apart, raw and absolute, until there's nothing left of me but the sound of my own breaking.

Yulian's voice comes softer now, almost gentle, but still threaded with that desperate insistence he never lets go of. "You can't see it now," he says, leaning closer, his hand hovering like he wants to touch me but doesn't dare, "because you're in an episode. You're drowning in it, Vaughn. But when it passes… when the fire burns out and you can breathe again… you'll know you're wrong. You'll know that you don't hate me more than him. You'll see that what he did will always cut deeper than anything I could ever do, because I've only ever-" his voice catches for the first time, "-I've only ever tried to keep your best interests at heart."

I shake my head violently, the motion tearing at me like glass. "You don't understand," I whisper, my voice fractured, my body shuddering with the weight of it. My fingernails scrape weakly at the floor, as though I could claw my way out of myself. "It's not about the lie itself. Not about which is worse, or which scars deeper, or whose words were sharper." My voice climbs, breaks, falls again. "It's about who said them."

He leans closer still, his forehead nearly touching mine, his eyes burning into me like he can will his truth into my bones. "How could

you possibly feel more betrayed by me than by him?" His voice is rough, edged with disbelief, with the ache of something he doesn't want to name.

I let out a sound that isn't quite a laugh and isn't quite a sob, but something jagged and broken caught between the two. My throat closes around it, my chest heaving, and I look at him through the blur of tears I can't stop anymore. The words tear themselves out of me like a confession I never meant to make, raw and absolute.

"Because I wasn't in love with him."

The silence that follows is unbearable. It presses down on me from every direction, suffocating, heavier than any scream could be. His face falters, the certainty in his eyes fracturing into something I've never seen before, shock, fear, a wound opening in real time.

And I wish, more than anything, that I could take it back.

But it's too late.

-

Yulian

-

For a moment, all I can do is stare at him, as if the walls of this house have folded in on themselves and left me standing in some strange, warped world where everything I thought I could anticipate has twisted into something sharp and unrecognisable. Vaughn's voice still echoes in my skull, rattling inside the hollows of me like a bullet ricocheting with nowhere to land. *Because I wasn't in love with him.*

I knew it already. Of course I did. I've known it for longer than I care to admit. I felt it in the way he looked at me that night on the cliffs, in the way he softened against me when we were alone, in every moan and groan against my skin. But knowing something and hearing it are two different things, and the first time that word leaves his mouth- *love* -it is in this broken, shattered moment, when his voice is raw and his eyes are glassed with betrayal so deep it doesn't even look like him anymore.

It hurts. Not the truth of it, not the fact of his love, *no*, that is the only thing that has ever felt like salvation. What hurts is that it comes out now, weaponised by pain, cracked down the middle by grief and rage, handed to me like a confession meant to cut instead of heal. I want to say it back.

The words hover on my tongue, heavy and desperate, pressing at the back of my teeth until I almost choke on them. *I love you, Vaughn. I love you the same way, more than the same way, and I have for a very, very long time.*

"I love-" I go to say.

But before I can even form them, he lashes out with a hoarse, broken voice. "No." His hand comes up between us like a barrier, not quite touching me, but it might as well be a knife. "Don't. Don't you dare say it back right now. I won't hear it. I won't believe you." His eyes cut into me, wild and furious, and I feel myself reel backwards from the force of it.

For the first time in a long time, I don't know what to do. My mouth falls open, gaping like some useless thing. My mind races for a plan, a strategy, a calculation, but all I find is the pounding of my own heart and the cavernous silence that grows between us. I want to reach for him, to grab his face and make him look at me properly, but I can feel

it, the barrier he's thrown up, solid and unyielding.

Frustration rises in me like bile, bitter and unrelenting. "I did it because she hurt you," I say, my voice sharper than I mean it to be, though threaded with something close to pleading. "Because she tried to destroy you, Vaughn, and I couldn't- I couldn't let anyone who's done that to you still walk this earth. That's all it was. That's all I was thinking of. You."

He lets out a laugh that's half-snarl, half-sob, shaking his head, his hair falling into his eyes as if even his body can't stand to hold the weight of him. "If that's really true, if you honestly thought it was such a good thing, then why the hell did you hide it from me?" His words slam into me, heavier than any blow, and though I open my mouth to respond, nothing comes. Not a single damn thing.

Because he's right.

I press my lips together, jaw clenched, searching for an excuse that doesn't sound like ashes. Nothing. My silence tells him everything, and I watch his face shift as realisation fills in the gaps.

"Exactly," he spits, his voice shaking. "You hid it because you knew. You knew what it would do to me. Don't stand there and tell me it was some great act of devotion when you couldn't even say it to my face."

The words burn. I have to look away, because the truth of them is unbearable, because my own silence is as much a betrayal as everything else. Eventually, I force myself to look back, to try and pull us out of the spiral we're both caught in. "Then clearly," I say tightly, "it's something we'll have to work through. Together. It won't be easy, but it's-"

He cuts me off, his voice thunderous, raw. “You’re not getting it, Yulian. This isn’t some small thing we can just *work through* like patching a hole in a wall. We lost eight years, eight fucking years, because of lies. Lies that nearly ruined me, lies that kept us both locked in cages we couldn’t break out of. And now, after everything, after finally clawing our way back to something real, you go and do it again?”

I inhale sharply, my chest tightening, my pulse a pounding drum in my ears.

He barrels on, his voice breaking and reforming with every word. “You had a million opportunities to come clean. A million times you could have told me the truth. But you didn’t. You waited. You hid it. And tell me, Yulian,” he stares at me with eyes that could gut me alive, “did you ever even plan on telling me?”

The silence that follows is damning. I can’t say yes. I can’t say no. I can’t say anything, because any answer will destroy us in different ways. My mouth moves, opens, closes, but the words are gone.

That’s all the answer he needs. He scoffs bitterly, pushes himself up off the floor, his movements jerky, full of energy he doesn’t know how to bleed out. The sight of him rising sends panic clawing through me, and instinct forces me to my feet as well, so that we stand there, facing each other, two wolves with blood already on their teeth.

“So, what does this mean then?” I ask, my voice harsh, my chest tight with fury I can’t control. “What are you saying?”

He stumbles over the words, his throat working, his mouth forming shapes but no sound. And I realise, I know what he’s trying to say. The

truth of it hits me before he can speak it aloud, and rage floods me so hot and fast I don't think before I move.

I slam him back against the wall, my hands gripping his shirt, pressing him there with a violence barely restrained. His eyes flare wide, but I don't let him speak, I don't give him room. My voice comes low, dangerous, shaking with the weight of my fury.

"No. You don't get to say it. You can be angry, you can scream at me, you can hate me for it, you can be as hurt as you want, but you cannot be without me." My face is inches from his, my breath hot against his skin, my words steel-edged and desperate. "I will not allow it. Not anymore. You belong to me, Vaughn, and I won't let anyone, not even you, change that. If you try to walk away from me, I swear I will hunt you to the ends of the earth. So you'd better get over this, or find a way to, because us not being together isn't an option."

For a second, he just gapes at me, eyes wide, lips parted, as if he doesn't even know how to answer. Then, with a trembling hand, he presses against my chest, not hard, not violently, just firmly enough, and I let him push me back. The absence of his body against mine feels like ice.

His voice is small when it comes, but steady. "I need some time apart."

"No." The word rips out of me before I can stop it, jagged and brutal.

"Yes." He cuts me off, his tone sharper now. "I'm not ending this. I'm not saying it's over. But I can't be near you right now. I need space, Yulian. Do you understand? Space."

I stare at him, every muscle locked, my breath coming sharp and shallow. My mind is screaming a thousand refusals, but nothing makes

it to my lips except a broken, stuttering sentence. “You can’t… you can’t leave me.” My voice cracks, quieter than I mean it, almost vulnerable, the fear bleeding through despite everything I try to hold it back with.

His eyes soften, just barely, but his jaw tightens. “I need to go. Don’t follow me.”

“Please,” I whisper, my throat burning, the word torn out of me against my will. “Stay.”

He shakes his head, his eyes wet, his voice breaking as he says it. “I can’t. Not now.”

And then he moves past me, and I let him, my body frozen, my feet heavy as stone. I don’t follow. I don’t move. I just stand there, listening to the sound of him walking away, each step tearing something out of me until the silence left behind is unbearable.

What have I done?

-

Vaughn

-

I tear down the half-lit stretch of road, the wind battering against my face like punishment, but no matter how fast I go, no matter how recklessly I lean into the turns, I can’t outrun the heaviness in my chest.

I grip the handlebars tighter, my knuckles burning white against the leather, and the ache behind my sternum feels like it's spreading, like it's not just in my chest anymore but seeping into my throat, my head, my very veins. Shattered doesn't even begin to cover it. I feel hollow and raw all at once, as though someone scooped out the insides of me with a jagged blade and then lit the remains on fire, and I don't know how to keep moving under the weight of it.

How did it all go so wrong so fast? Just this morning, I woke up from dreaming about eating pizza and watching Harry Potter in hotel rooms, holding hands while strolling through the streets of Dublin, and standing in each other's arms on the beautiful Moher Cliffs.

And look at us now.

One minute, I was certain, anchored in the ferocity of my anger, my disgust, my betrayal, the only thing I was sure of in that suffocating room with him was that I couldn't just let what he did go. I remember the way the words hovered on the edge of my tongue, so close I could taste them, bitter and metallic, like blood: *we can't be together, I can't do this, we are over.* They were right there, trembling in my throat, begging to be spoken, the clean finality of an ending offering itself like a blade that could cut us both free.

But I didn't say them.

And it wasn't because of his action, not really. It wasn't because of that furious, possessive snarl in his voice when he slammed me against the wall and told me he wouldn't allow me to leave him, wouldn't let me go, would hunt me to the ends of the earth if I tried. That wasn't what stopped me.

It wasn't even because some small part of me thought he might be right, that maybe this was something I could learn to get over,

something I'd one day look back on with less rage than I feel now. No, it was me. It was only ever me.

I couldn't say it because the truth is hideously, blindingly simple: I just couldn't do it. I couldn't end it. Not because of his words, not because of his grip or his threats or his promises, but because I couldn't survive the thought of walking away.

And God, how pathetic is that? That I, Vaughn Morozov, heir to the New York branch of the Russian Bratva, can't even find the strength to let go of one man who betrayed me. That I am so deeply, irrevocably, obsessively in love with him that the thought of ending it feels like a death sentence I don't have the courage to sign.

Because it's true. I didn't mean for it to come out like that, not in that moment, not spit out between sobs and rage and betrayal, but I wasn't lying when I said it. I'm in love with him. I have been for a long time, and it's wound itself into my bones like marrow, carved itself into my skin like scripture, stitched itself into every nerve ending until there is no piece of me left untouched by him.

I'm in love with him so much it terrifies me, so much it consumes me, so much that even now, when I should want to tear him out of me, I find I can't breathe at the thought of not being his.

So I didn't say it. I didn't cut us apart. Instead, I asked for space, the coward's compromise, because at least space is temporary, at least space leaves the door open, at least space doesn't feel like ripping my own heart out of my chest with my bare hands.

The bike growls beneath me, vibrating up into my legs, but it feels distant, like none of this is real, like I'm watching someone else ride through the dark night with tears drying stiff on his face. By the time the mansion comes into view, looming and cold and far too big for me

to feel anything but small inside it, my body feels heavier than it should, my shoulders hunched against the sheer exhaustion of carrying all this hurt.

I kill the engine in the driveway and listen to the silence close in around me like a coffin lid slamming shut. For a moment, I can't move. I sit there on the bike, staring at the empty windows, every one of them dark like eyes refusing to look at me. Eventually, I force myself to dismount, my legs stiff, and drag myself through the front door, up the endless staircase, down the long hallway that seems to stretch on forever before it spits me into the cavernous solitude of my bedroom.

Never in my life have I been more grateful to not see my friends.

The door closes behind me with a click that feels like it seals me in, and I don't bother with the lights. I stumble to the bed and collapse onto it, curling myself into the smallest shape I can make, like if I fold in on myself tightly enough, maybe I can hold myself together. The sheets are cold, the silence pressing, and I pull the blanket up over me like a shield against the crushing emptiness of the room.

I don't know what to do. I don't know how to handle this. Every time I close my eyes, I see his face, the way he flinched when I told him I hated him more than I hated his father, the way he looked at me when the word *love* slipped from my mouth, the way he grabbed me and snarled that I was his. And underneath it all, the ache, the unbearable ache that no matter what he's done, no matter how deep the betrayal runs, I still want him. I still need him.

I feel weak. Pathetic. Less than nothing. Just a week ago, I was sitting at a table across from men who would slit throats for sport, shaking hands on a deal that will go down in history as one of the most powerful moves our organisation has ever made. I was the picture of composure, of authority, of strength. And now? Now I'm lying in my own bed, curled up like a child, crying alone over a man who has lied

to me, hurt me, shattered me, and still somehow owns every piece of me I've got left.

The more I cry, the smaller I feel, until I can barely hold myself up under the weight of it. My chest aches with every breath, and I can't think straight, can't see a way forward, can't imagine a world where this doesn't hurt like hell.

So I do the only thing I can think of. The only thing that might make me feel like less of a ghost in my own skin. My hand trembles as I reach for the phone on the nightstand, my vision blurry as I scroll through until I find the name I've been avoiding for too long. Because if there is anyone who would see right through me, it's her. My thumb hovers for a second, then presses.

It rings once. Twice. Three times. And then her voice, soft and familiar, filters through, warm in a way that makes my throat close up. "Hi, honey. Are you okay?"

The sound of it breaks me clean in two. My voice cracks on the first word, small and shaking and nothing like the man I pretend to be. "Hi, Mum." A sob claws its way up my throat, and I press it down. I can't have her hear me break, she'll already have questions, I can't let her have any more.

The words spill out anyway, wrecked and desperate. "No. No, I'm not. Can I… can I please come home?"

Chapter End Notes

hope you all enjoyed! or as much as you could, considering how painful it was lol...
i was so happy with how this chap came out, i really wanted to show just how deeply the betrayal and pain ran for vaughn, to show why this is such a big deal to him and why its not something small that he can just get over. i also wanted to

emphasize how it isnt necessarily about the fact it was camilla (although, her specifically will come up again), but the fact that yulian lied for so long, and so obviously was never going to come clean, that really hurt vaughn.
anyway, i know that several of you have been wanting to see sasha and kirill, so i hope your excited for the next chap!
thank you for all the support as always, it means the world <333

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Notes

hi hope you enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vaughn

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Everything in my head is shattered, and I can't piece it back together.

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There is no strength, there is no control, and there is no him.

I sit on my bed, flat on my back, staring at nothing.

I keep telling myself I don't want him here. That I can't want him here. But my body doesn't listen.

My hands ache for the shape of his, my skin prickles for his touch and my ears wait for his voice.

It's pathetic. I hate myself for missing him like this.

Every time I close my eyes, I see his face. The way it crumpled when I said I hated him more than his father. I replay it, over and over, like a

punishment just for me. His mouth tightening, his eyes flicking away like he couldn't stand to meet mine anymore. That look, it burns me alive. And still… I can't stop wanting him back.

But then I hear the words he couldn't bring himself to say. That he *never* would have brought himself to say. Words that he would've kept buried, no matter how much it would've destroyed me.

He knows what lies have done to me. He knows what lies have done to us. And still, *still* he was willing to take it to the grave as if it were nothing.

My head won't stop spinning in circles. Hurt, want, hate, love. All tangled up so I can't find where one ends and the other begins. I think about calling him, that if I begged maybe he'd come to me, come back *to* me. But then it hits me: back to what? Back to wondering every time he touches me if he's hiding something else? Back to suspicion curled under my ribs like a knife?

It's easier not to move. Not to eat. Not to sleep. My body doesn't even try anymore. Food tastes like ash. Nights stretch out into nothing, and when sleep comes it's worse. Dreams filled with him, reaching for me, leaving me, smiling like he used to, betraying me again and again.

I'm a mess. I know it. I can't think straight. Everything I was holding up with him has just… collapsed. I didn't realize how much I leaned on him, how much I needed him to keep breathing from one day to the next. Without him it's all just noise. Grey and empty.

And yet, I can't call. I won't. Because if I do, I lose whatever's left of me. If I do, I hand him every piece, and he'll crush it without even meaning to. And I can't survive that again.

So I sit. And I stare. And I let myself break.

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“This section here,” my father murmurs, tapping the edge of a sheet of paper, “the agreement about building new airfields on the Western coasts of Ireland to transport goods. You’ve agreed to split the building costs seventy-thirty, with us handling the larger amount. That’s generous.”

I lean forward, scanning the text. My handwriting is in the margins already, notes and cross-outs from earlier in the day. I feel a tinge of nerves flare up inside me. My father trusted me to make the best decisions, even regarding money, when it came to this deal. I don’t want to disappoint him.

I sit up straight, clearing my throat. “This deal is as much about securing our future as it is about securing our present. The official deal may only be for four years, but it is with the promise of a further one once the Irish are, hopefully, entirely back on their feet at the end of this. Right now, they need us more than we need them. That’s why I thought it was important to give them some grace, and in bigger budgets such as airfields, I agreed on a larger split. If you look at other sections with smaller portions of the budget, you’ll see that the split is much closer, even in our favour in a few cases.”

I hold my breath, waiting for his response.

“Good,” he says, sitting back in his chair with the kind of calm that always unnerved competitors, “exactly the sort of thing that makes them think we are doing them a favour, but will still benefit us in the long run. Acutely justified, too. Well done, son.”

I nod, looking down at the paper to hide my wide grin. But, when he claps a hand on my back, I turn to look at him, and he gives me an affectionate smile back. He glances over the clause again, satisfied, and a small flicker of pride moves through me, pride that doesn't feel forced or heavy the way so many other things in my life have lately.

With my father, it isn't about proving myself. It's about building something with him, alongside him. The silence between us is comfortable, productive, a silence that doesn't need filling.

"You're getting sharper," he says quietly, almost like it's an afterthought, but I catch the weight in it.

"Learning from the best," I answer, and he chuckles.

For the next half hour, we move smoothly through the stack, reviewing the documents. There are a few places my father marks as potential points to negotiate, ones that he doesn't necessarily completely agree with. But he never makes me feel stupid or incompetent about them. Just simply states that it's a difference of opinion, and when I'm Pakhan, I'll be free to make deals exactly how I want.

My father's voice is steady, his reasoning crisp. He has me explain more key parts of the deal, come up with more justifications so that he himself can take them back to the other high-ranking members of our organization.

When we reach the last page, he sets his pen down and stretches back in his chair. "That's enough for tonight. We'll have the rest finalised over the next few days." His eyes flick to the clock. "Come on. Dinner's waiting."

I hesitate, my pen lingering against the paper. My stomach has been tied in knots all day, appetite nowhere to be found, too busy thinking about someone. I shake my head slightly. “I’m not really hungry. I’ll eat later.”

My father gives me a look, patient, but edged with that subtle firmness I’ve never been able to push past. “Wrong answer. Come on.”

“I’m fine, really-”

“Your mother organized it,” he adds firmly, “you will not upset her by skipping it.”

Now I know I definitely don’t have a choice. If it has the potential to upset my mother if I don’t go, my father will drag me by the ear. I glance up at him, confused. “What’s going on?”

“You’ll see,” he says, standing, brushing invisible dust from his sleeve. “Come on.”

I close the file reluctantly and rise from the chair, straightening my cuffs, the unease twisting tighter in my gut. He doesn’t offer me more explanation, and I don’t press him. Not here, not now. I fall into step beside him, the soft sound of our shoes on the polished floor carrying us out of the study and toward the dining room.

As we walk, my thoughts begin to circle back, heavy and unrelenting. It’s been a week since I returned to New York. A week that feels stretched thin and frayed, as though time itself is wary of touching me too closely.

All my friends have asked why I left so abruptly. Their texts, their calls, the sharp questions hidden beneath their casual tones. I haven't known what to tell them. I've offered excuses, fragments, evasions, but never the truth. Because what can I tell them? That I left because of Yulian? Because everything I thought I knew about him shattered in a single night? Because I couldn't breathe on that damn island anymore, couldn't bare to be that close to him, so I had to put an ocean between us?

Yulian messaged me nonstop in those first few days. The buzzing of my phone became a constant background hum, his name flashing across the screen again and again. At first I ignored him. Then, finally, when the weight of it became unbearable, I told him to stop. I expected defiance, persistence, some manipulative plea. Instead, to my surprise, he did stop. Just like that. Silence where there had been noise.

It should have been a relief, but it wasn't. The absence of his voice, his words, was louder somehow.

My parents haven't asked me directly why I came back. But I know they know something is wrong, especially after my tearful call to mum. My dad's eyes linger a fraction too long when he speaks to me. My mum's hand brushes my shoulder in passing, softer than usual, like she's testing the air for fractures.

They've been giving me space, waiting for me to bring it to them. And I'm grateful for that. Grateful that they don't push, don't demand, don't force me to say aloud what I can't yet shape into words.

But beneath the gratitude, there's a gnawing edge of guilt. Because they're waiting for something I'm not sure I'll ever be able to give them.

The moment I step into the dining room, the lights flare bright above me, and the air fills with a chorus of voices shouting, “Surprise!” The sound hits me like a physical force, and I freeze for half a second, my hand still gripping the doorframe. My eyes dart across the room.

Faces, familiar and beloved, are all gathered around the long table. My mother stands at the head of it, her expression glowing with delight, and suddenly she’s rushing forward, arms outstretched.

“Vaughn, sweetheart,” she says, her voice warm and smooth. She folds me into a hug that squeezes the air out of my lungs. “We wanted to do congratulate you properly on the Irish deal, to celebrate you the way you deserve. The whole family wanted to be here.”

For a moment, I let myself melt into her arms, inhaling the familiar scent of her perfume, the grounding weight of her presence. I manage a soft, “Thanks, Mum,” before she finally releases me, her eyes glassy with pride.

I turn, already smiling, and spot two figures I rarely get the chance to see, Uncle Ant and Uncle Maks, with Mike hovering beside them. Both my uncles live in Russia most of the year, and it’s usually only at Christmas that I get to see them. Mike lived in Russia with them until he was eighteen, but then went to MIT, and has just finished his PhD there, so we get to see him a little more often as he isn’t too far.

Now, seeing them all here feels surreal. I stride over quickly and pull both Anton and Maksim into a tight embrace, ignoring Anton’s familiar grumble as he mutters something about how tightly I’m squeezing him.

“You’re not allowed to complain,” I say, my voice catching faintly. “I don’t get to see you enough.”

Maksim laughs, clapping me on the back. “Well, if you break my ribs, brat, you won’t see me again for another year.” He grins, though, his sharp humour softened by the affection in his eyes.

Mike gets his turn next. He’s a little shorter than me and his shoulders are less filled out, while his shy smile is exactly the same as I remember it. I grip him hard in a hug, and he returns it with quiet warmth.

“It’s good to see you, Mike,” I say. “I’ve missed you.”

“Missed you too,” he replies, voice gentle but sincere.

From across the room, a familiar voice cuts through. “Well, look who finally remembered his cousin exists.”

I turn to see Lidya standing there, arms folded, a teasing smile on her face. She looks just like her mother, delicate and soft around the edges, her long blonde hair falling in gentle waves down her back. I stride toward her and pull her into a hug so tight she squeaks.

“Don’t you dare guilt me,” I murmur into her hair. “I’ve been back a week, sure, but-”

“A week,” she interrupts, pulling back and smacking my arm. “You were gone for months and then you’ve been hiding out here instead of seeing me? Unforgivable.”

“I texted you, like, every day.”

“Whatever.”

I laugh, a sound that feels foreign in my own throat these days. “Will you forgive me?”

“Maybe,” she says, though her smile betrays her answer. She hugs me tighter, and for a moment, I don’t feel so fractured.

Her parents are next. Aunt Kristina rises from her seat, heartfelt smile warming her whole face as she leans in to hug me.

“We’re so proud of you, Vaughn,” she whispers. “Kosta told me all about it.”

“Thank you, Aunt Kristina,” I say, kissing her cheek.

Uncle Kosta, looming nearby with his arms crossed, doesn’t move right away. His brow is furrowed, his expression stormy. Still, I step in and hug him anyway, ignoring the way his body stiffens.

“Congratulations,” he mutters, begrudgingly. His voice is deep and gravelly, carrying the weight of his displeasure.

“Thank you, uncle,” I reply happily, ignoring his grumpiness, giving him a wry smile as I step back. I know him well enough to understand the root of his mood, and I’m sure he’ll have more to say about it later.

Then comes Aunt Karina, who leaps up with all the energy of a

firecracker. “Vaughn!” she shrieks, practically launching herself into my arms. “I was starting to think we’d never get you back here!”

Her wild laughter fills my ears, and I spin her around once before setting her down. “You haven’t changed at all,” I tell her.

“Never will,” she replies proudly, tousling my hair like I’m still ten.

Finally, Uncle Viktor. He stands behind her, tall and stoic, though an approving smile decorates his face. Years with his hyperactive wife has softened him. “Well done,” he says simply, clapping me on the shoulder.

I nod back, grateful.

We all take our seats as Anna and the house staff begin to bring in dishes, roasted meats, bowls of steaming vegetables and fresh bread. Plates and silverware clink as everyone begins to tuck in, chatter filling every corner of the room.

I feel slightly overwhelmed. My chest is still raw, still aching from everything left unresolved inside me, but as I glance around the table at my family, laughing, eating, alive, I can’t help but feel a fragile sense of comfort. If anything can pull me from the dark edge I’ve been teetering on, it’s this. Them.

The conversation, inevitably, shifts toward the Irish deal. Compliments fly in from every direction, Kristina beaming with pride, Karina making some dramatic joke about me charming the entire nation, even Viktor offering a terse but sincere offer of praise. I accept their words with as much grace as I can muster, though inside, I feel hollow.

Then, Kosta clears his throat, his gruff voice cutting through the cheer. “Still don’t appreciate you selling off my daughter,” he grumbles, shooting me a look sharp enough to cut glass.

Across the table, my father sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Konstantin,” he says, tone firm but half-joking, “you need to get over this. Lidya is a grown woman now. You can’t keep guarding her like a child.”

Kosta scowls deeper, his arm instinctively curling around his wife’s chair. “She’s my daughter. I’ll never stop guarding her.”

“Papa,” Lidya groans, rolling her eyes. “Stop embarrassing me. I gave my permission for the arrangement, remember? And I can still take it back whenever I want. No one’s forcing me into anything.”

I jump in quickly, sensing the tension thickening. “Also, it’s highly unlikely the marriage will ever happen,” I explain. “It’s just a contingency clause, a backup if our organizations can’t forge another deal within a year of the current one ending. Honestly, I don’t see that happening. So really, Uncle, there’s nothing to worry about.”

He mutters something unintelligible, still grumbling under his breath, until Kristina leans over and kisses his cheek, whispering something in his ear. He softens, his shoulders loosening, though he doesn’t say more.

The mood lightens again when Mike, quietly picking at his food, speaks up. “It really is impressive, Vaughn,” he says, his voice earnest. “The scale of it, the… well, all of it. I read some of the documents. It’s brilliant.”

I grin, seizing the opportunity. “High praise coming from you, Mike. Aren’t you about to start at NASA? After getting your PhD at MIT?”

His cheeks flush crimson. “Y-yes,” he stammers. “Next month.”

Maksim beams, patting Mike’s shoulder. “We’re very proud of him,” he says, his eyes brightening and sincerity shining through.

“You should be,” I reply. “He’s making us all look bad.”

Laughter ripples around the table, and for the next while, the conversation drifts to easier topics, Aunt Karina recounting some wild story about nearly setting her kitchen on fire last week, Uncle Kosta groaning at her exaggeration; Lidya teasing me about my hopeless taste in music; Uncle Viktor occasionally interjecting with dry, biting remarks that somehow make the whole table laugh harder. Even Uncle Ant joins in, eventually softening enough to smirk when Uncle Maks and Mike gang up on him.

I sit back in my chair, watching them all, the people who raised me, shaped me, held me steady through every storm. My chest aches with everything I haven’t said, the weight of secrets and betrayals that I don’t have the strength to bring into this room, not tonight. But for now, I let myself bask in them. In their love, their chaos, their unwavering presence.

-

I retreat upstairs the moment I can politely get away, offering a few final smiles and half-hearted goodbyes before slipping out of the dining room and leaving the warmth of family chatter behind me.

My social battery has already burned out, extinguished as quickly as the candles flickering down the table, leaving me drained in a way that feels heavier than simple tiredness. It's more than fatigue, it's the weight of everything pressing down on me at once.

By the time I reach my room, I don't bother turning on the light. I just close the door behind me, toe off my shoes, and let myself collapse into the bed. The sheets are cool against my face as I curl up on my side, facing the wall, my arms drawn tight around myself as if I can keep all the cracks from splitting wider. It's the same bed I slept in for years, the same room that always felt like safety, but now even here in the dark, I can't escape the ache in my chest.

I lie still. I don't know how long passes before I hear it, a soft knock at the door. My first instinct is to ignore it. If I stay silent long enough, whoever it is will assume I'm already asleep, leave me alone in the darkness to wallow and fall apart the way I want to. So I don't answer, I don't move, and I keep perfectly still, hoping.

But the door opens anyway, and the faint light from the hallway spills into the room in a thin line. I don't look, but I know it's her even before she speaks, before I feel the dip of the mattress and the familiar touch of her hand smoothing through my hair. My mother.

She doesn't say anything at first. She just sits down and guides my head into her lap, like she used to when I was younger, before I grew too old, before I decided that being comforted like that made me weak. I should tell her I'm too old for it now, that it's unnecessary, but the truth is I don't have the strength to protest. And maybe, deep down, I don't want to.

"I know something is very wrong," she says finally, her voice quiet, careful, as though she doesn't want to push too hard and risk breaking me further. "We wanted to cheer you up tonight, with everyone here, with the family gathered, but-"

“You did,” I interrupt, quickly, too quickly, before she can finish, before she can say anything that will make me feel even worse. “Dinner was… it was good. I loved it.”

Her hand continues its slow motion through my hair, smoothing, soothing. “I’m glad. But, Vaughn… if you don’t want to talk about it yet, I understand. I won’t push. Just know your father and I are here. For you. Whenever you’re ready.”

I close my eyes. The darkness behind them feels heavier now, pressing into me. “Thank you,” I murmur, my voice barely above a whisper. I hesitate, then the question slips out before I can stop myself. “How did you know? That Dad was… the one.”

There’s a small pause. I can almost feel her surprise, the way she draws in a breath, caught off guard. Then, slowly, she answers. “Because I realized I couldn’t live without him. He consumed me entirely, every part of me. And though it wasn’t always easy, and trust me, it *really* wasn’t easy, I knew, even when he made mistakes, none of them could undo what I felt for him. None of them were enough to change the fact that I was in love with him. Hopelessly so. And that… that’s how I knew.”

Her words strike through me like a blade. They sound too much like me, too much like Yulian, too much like the hollow echo I carry in my chest. And I can’t help but wonder, if she could survive it, if she could stay, if she could forgive… then maybe, maybe there’s still something left for us, too. Maybe we aren’t as irreparably broken as I tell myself we are. My parents, after all, are the blueprint, the foundation, the proof that it can work even when it seems impossible.

“Is this about Camilla?” she asks suddenly.

The name freezes me in place, lodges in my throat like a stone. For a heartbeat, I don't know what to say, because, *technically*, it is. Not the way she's thinking, not about infidelity or love lost, but Camilla's name is tangled in the web, tied to the lies and the pain. So I nod, or at least something like a nod, and murmur, "Sort of. Yes."

Her hand stills for a moment in my hair, then resumes. "If she cheated, then she wasn't right for you," my mother says firmly, her voice filled with conviction. "What happened to her in the end was sad, but it was her choice do to that, and it was her choice to hurt you. You deserve a woman who loves you as fiercely as you will love her."

I wince at the word. *Woman*. It stings, even though she doesn't mean it to. It's not who I want. It's not who I love. The thought burns in me, silent and hidden.

Not to mention, it actually wasn't her choice. It wasn't her choice at all. He took that away from her.

"How important is it," I hear myself ask, "that I… provide heirs? Biological children?"

This time, her pause is longer. It feels like a ridiculous question, because I already know the answer. There are still several 'traditional' high ranking members of our organization, who will always have certain expectations. "I'll admit, Vaughn," she says carefully, "it is important. Heirs solidify your position, make others less uneasy about the future. Blood is very important in the bratva. But-" she presses her hand against my head, firm, grounding-"if it doesn't happen that way, if it can't, then your father and I will protect you, defend you, in every way possible. You have nothing to worry about."

She adds, softly, "I thought you wanted children, though."

“I do,” I say quickly, maybe too quickly. “Yes. I do.” And I do. I want that. But the picture that flashes in my head isn’t a wife, a woman, it’s Yulian. It’s Yulian’s arms, Yulian’s smile, Yulian’s life tangled with mine. And even though I desperately picture a child with his hair and nose, and my eyes and mouth, I know we can never have that, it’s not possible.

“What about adoption?” I ask, my voice quieter now.

“Adoption?” she repeats, a little confused. “If you really wanted to… I suppose. We would support you. But it would always be better, stronger, if they were biological. The bratva views bloodlines very strongly.”

I just nod. I don’t say anything else.

“You don’t need to worry,” she says after a moment, her voice slipping into that reassuring tone she’s always had. “You’ll find the right woman. Someone perfect for you, who will give you as many heirs as you need. Who will love you fiercely and who you’ll spend every day thanking whoever made it possible you met her. It’ll all work out in the end.”

I force myself to murmur, “Thank you.” Because what else can I say? She believes she’s helping, believes she’s lightening the weight on my shoulders. And I love her for it. But the truth is, she’s only pressing me further down into the dark, into the pit I can’t climb out of.

Still, I don’t stop her when she keeps stroking my hair, gentle and rhythmic, until my eyes grow heavier, until the darkness swallows me whole, and I drift into an uneasy sleep with the ache still clinging to my chest.

My head's a mess. A raw, splintered mess. Thoughts don't line up anymore, they fall over themselves, crush each other, leave me breathless. I can't catch one before another smashes through.

-

When I wake the next morning, my head is the clearest it's been in months.

-

Control. I've always needed it, no, craved it.

My life makes sense only when I can grip it in my hands, force order into chaos, hold myself tight enough that nothing spills. Discipline, sharpness, everything in its right place. That's how you survive. That's how you win. But with *him*, I threw all of that away like it was nothing.

Like control meant less than the taste of his mouth, the heat of his voice, the way he looked at me like I was the only thing in the world. I gave him every piece of me I swore I would never give to anyone.

And I didn't even think. Didn't stop, didn't weigh it. Just followed, blind. Blind and so fucking stupid.

I should have seen. Should have thought about what it means. We are *enemies*. Our families, if my parents were ever in a room with his father, at least one wouldn't walk out. No compromise. No peace. Just

bullets and bodies on the floor. But I never stopped to think about it. I was too busy… feeling. Too busy being his.

It's idiotic. I'm idiotic.

What did I think was going to happen? That we could pretend the rest of the world didn't exist? That being in love was enough? It isn't. It never was. We can't rule together. We can't stand side by side. He'll inherit his empire. I'll inherit mine. Our territories don't touch, they clash. Our bloodlines don't fit, they reject each other. We can't make an heir. We can't build anything that lasts.

So what the hell was I thinking?

The truth is, I wasn't. That's the rot at the centre of it. I wasn't thinking. I wasn't controlling. I let go of the one thing that's kept me breathing all these years. And the moment I opened my arms, he walked in and took everything. And I let him. I begged him.

There is no control. Yulian took it, and I didn't even fight him for it. I gave it up. That's the sickest part. I wanted him to have it. I wanted to feel unmade by him. I wanted him to decide, to touch, to tear, to claim. I told myself it was trust. But really, it was me walking into the fire with my eyes shut, thinking that he would be enough for the flames not to burn.

And now I'm ash.

I've been so wrapped up in him, so blind, so eager to drown, I didn't even notice how deep the water was until I couldn't breathe anymore. And even now, choking on it, some part of me still wants him. That's the sickest, weakest part of me.

I'll always want him.

I can't balance this. I can't balance anything. My duty, my family, the blood I carry, the weight I've been raised for, all of it demands control, coldness, choices made with steel, not with hunger. And then there's me, making decisions with my chest instead of my head, letting Yulian unravel me strand by strand.

How do I put the pieces back together now?

I keep asking myself if I'd go back, if I'd undo it. If I'd fight him instead of letting him in. And the truth is ugly. The truth is I'd do it all again, even knowing how it ends. That's what makes me the worst kind of fool.

Because I can't have both. I can't be who I was raised to be and be his. I can't hold control in one hand and hold him in the other. One cancels the other out.

And I'm starting to think I've already lost both.

-

The phone feels heavy in my hand. In my grip it's unbearable, suffocating, like it's soaked in lead and grief and everything I don't want to admit. I've been circling this moment for over a week, knowing it was coming, knowing I couldn't avoid it forever, but hoping, pathetically, that somehow the universe would save me from it, that time would dissolve the choice, or that he'd do what he always does and crash through every wall I build and decide for both of us. But he hasn't. And that means it's on me.

I should have done it at his mansion. I should have said it then. Should have torn myself apart to end it face-to-face. But I couldn't. Because he was standing there. Because he was real in a way that still strips me of air. Because I wasn't ready to cut myself away from the one thing that's been keeping me alive even while he's been killing me.

So I walked away instead. And I've been carrying this rotting weight in my chest since.

But maybe now, without his eyes on mine, without the iron gravity of his presence anchoring me in place, I can finally do it.

My thumb trembles above his name. I'm feel my eyes stinging before I press it, though I don't even notice the tears until one lands on my hand, cold and shocking. I swipe it away, take a breath that feels like swallowing shards, and press *call*.

The dial tone echoes, distant and hollow, like the sound of a cavern.

For a moment, I wish, desperately, that he doesn't pick up. But he does.

His voice hits me sharply, with no hesitation, as if he had been waiting for this moment and is wasting no time at all. "Vaughn?" He doesn't even wait for me to speak, panic laced in the syllables, sharp edges of desperation hidden under steel. "Are you okay?"

"No." The truth tears its way out before I can stop it. My voice is

ragged, broken. “Are you?” I ask him.

He breathes hard, quick, then says softer, “no.”

It hurts me, knowing I’ve hurt him, that I’m *currently* hurting him.

There’s silence that’s too heavy. Then his voice again, sharper now, edged with annoyance that scrapes against my raw skin: “So? Are you ready to get over it? To stop punishing me? To come back where you belong?”

The words slam into me. My throat burns and I feel a sudden surge of anger flood me at his dismissive tone, how carelessly he just ignores the entire reason I’m an ocean away right now. I clench the phone tighter. “That-” My voice cracks, I bite it back, try again. “That is exactly the problem. You still don’t understand why what you did is wrong.”

“I do.” His voice rises, firm, insistent. “I shouldn’t have kept it a secret, fine. I’ll give you that. But don’t twist this into something else. I killed her for you. Because she hurt you. Because she cheated on you, Vaughn, and I could never, *never*, let someone who hurt you live.”

I shake my head, tears falling faster now. My heart is thrashing against my ribs. “She cheated *with you*, Yulian!” The words tear out of me in a shout, sharp enough to leave me gasping.

“So what?” His voice is a growl now, unhinged and certain. “We weren’t together yet, and it doesn’t matter. I was testing her. She failed. I gave her what she deserved. I made the right choice.”

My hand shakes. My entire body shakes. “It wasn’t your choice to make!” I shout back, louder this time, my voice strangled and breaking.

For the first time, there’s silence. Silence so sharp it stings.

Finally, his voice returns, low, dangerous, calm in a way that terrifies me more than his shouting ever could. “I’m sorry you feel that way. But it changes nothing. You have always belonged to me. You always will. And I did what was right to protect what belongs to me.”

My breath rattles out of me, too fast, too heavy. Rage and sorrow and exhaustion crush me from every side. “You don’t get it,” I whisper, though I know he hears me.

That’s the problem, he doesn’t see why what he did was so wrong. He might acknowledge his wrongfulness in the lying, but if he thinks I can move on so easily, then he doesn’t truly understand. He can take responsibility when he knows he’s wrong. But if he won’t now, it means he truly doesn’t think he has anything to apologise for. He really doesn’t see it. And I… I can’t get over that.

He says nothing. My chest aches with the weight of everything I’ll never get from him.

I sigh, heavy, hollow. “Fine. Even ignoring all of this, everything, you know as well as I do we still can’t work.”

“Don’t,” he snaps, sharp as glass. “Don’t you dare-”

“No.” My voice firms, even though my heart is screaming. “You’ll

listen to me, Yulian. You'll shut up and fucking listen."

I breathe in, ragged, and start. "We can't produce heirs. Our friends and family have years of hatred between them. So many high-ranking members still stuck in their traditions will never accept us. If my parents ever stood in the same room as your father, someone would die before they get out. Tell me, just one of these things, just one, how do we fix it? And I don't want some half-arsed answer, tell me something solid that can actually work."

Silence. He doesn't answer. Because he can't.

"That's what I thought." My voice cracks, tears streaking hot down my face. "I'm sorry, Yulian, for everything, for not being enough, for being too much, for wanting something that was never possible. But we can't do this anymore. We're done."

"Vaughn." His voice drops, low and commanding, the kind that always pins me in place, the kind that makes me want to obey even when every rational part of me screams not to. "Don't do this. You don't mean it. You're scared, you're hurt, you're, fuck, you're *breaking*, I can hear it in your voice, but don't you dare walk away from me. Don't you dare."

My lips tremble, but I press on, because if I don't end it now, I'll never find the courage again. "I'm sorry," I whisper, and the words feel like knives in my throat, "but it's breaking me to stay, Zmejka."

"No." His voice is a roar now, desperate, furious, unhinged. "No, you don't get to decide this. You think you can just *end* me? End us? You think you can cut me out like I'm disposable? You're mine, Vaughn. You've always been mine. You'll come back. You always do."

I choke on the sob tearing out of me. My chest is collapsing, my lungs turning to ash. “Not this time.”

And before he can say another word, before his chaos and his certainty can twist my resolve back into something weak, I hit *end call*.

The silence is immediate, terrifying and final.

My thumb trembles. I stare at his name on the screen, etched there like a wound that will never close. And then, with everything in me breaking, I block him.

The phone falls from my hand. I collapse back onto the bed, hands over my face, and the sob finally breaks free, tearing me open, leaving me raw.

It’s done. I did it.

So why does it feel like I’ve just cut the only lifeline I’ve ever had?

It feels like I’ve torn out my own heart and left it bleeding on the floor. I stare at the ceiling and it’s like the air’s been sucked out of the room. My chest aches with this raw, heavy weight I can’t breathe past.

I wanted the control that comes with staying away from him, where he can’t lie to me ever again. I wanted power, the kind that comes being the Pakhan, and I knew I could never have that, not with him. But the second the block went through; I felt something inside me collapse. The silence isn’t peace; it’s a death sentence.

All I feel is emptiness. It's unbearable. It's loud, deafening, how empty it is without him. I press my hands into my face, gripping so hard it hurts, but nothing cuts deeper than this loss.

I keep replaying every word, every touch, every cruel look that broke me, every stolen moment that stitched me back together just enough to break me again. The push and pull. The way he knew exactly where to press, where to hurt, where to soothe. And I let him. God, I let him. And I know I'll never stop craving it, craving *him*, not in this life, not in any lifetime.

My chest is a storm of pain, guilt, anger, hurt all tangled so tightly I can't separate them. I can't move. I just sit here drowning in it. It's too much. I want to scream, but my throat won't open. I want to cry, but the tears stop coming. My body refuses to release it, so it stays trapped inside me, tearing me apart.

I thought maybe if I cut him off, I could heal. But, with less than a minute since I ended it, I already know that it's impossible. Happiness without him is no longer a reality I can exist in. Instead, it feels like I've killed myself. Like the part of me that was still alive, even when he was hurting me, is gone now. Because even in the worst of it, he was there. Even in the pain, he was mine in some twisted way. And now he isn't. Now he's nothing. And without him, I'm nothing too.

The guilt gnaws at me. The shame. I can't stop thinking about how weak that makes me, how pathetic. How much I need him even now, after everything.

I hate him. I miss him. I need him. I want to destroy him. I want him to hold me. Every thought contradicts itself until I can't tell which one's real. Maybe all of them are. Maybe none. All I know is I can't breathe without him.

I curl in on myself, wishing the world would stop, wishing time would freeze, wishing I could go back five minutes and undo what I just did. But it's too late. I made the choice, and now the silence is here to stay. And it feels like it's killing me.

And the most unbearable part, the cruelest truth of it all, is that no matter how much of this pain is his fault, no matter how much of this destruction belongs to his hands, the only thing I want in this entire world, the only thing that could soothe me, is him.

Chapter End Notes

im sorry <3
hope you enjoyed that as much as you could considering that it was actually just very sad.
i hope you at least liked seeing all of vaughns family. fun fact: the scene was originally supposed to be all the mafia family e.g rai, kyle, reina, asher, adrian, lia etc to celebrate vaughn, but i decided to change it cause there are already plans for the mafia members to show up for something else, but i never intended for any of vaughns family to show up aside from lidya. a few people asked if they could tho, and so i decided to change the scene.
im also gunna say that im taking a little break from writing for something else, so i wont be writing again probably until friday this coming week, and obvs idk how long itll take to write the chap, so next chap probably wont be for at least a week if not more.
thank you for your support as always <3

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Notes

> hi! sorry this chap took so long. i said at the end of last chap that i had something to do, and so i wouldnt be able to write for a week. the thing i had to do was actually read Kingdom of Ash lol. I thought a week would be enough to read the whole thing plus i knew i would need time to recover. but i actually read the entire thing in 24 hours and then still havent recovered from it now. literally everything i did just lead me back to that book and that whole series.
> anyway, i managed to push throne of glass from my mind for enough time to finally write this, but it took me a while and a lot of breaks haha.
> enjooy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yulian

-

For the last week, I've been living on autopilot. Breathing, but not really alive. Moving through rooms like a ghost, feeling like I'm eternally drenched in shadows that refuse to let any light in. It's as if he took all the light with him, and now I'm left with nothing but darkness and grief.

Everything has dulled, muffled, fogged over, like the world itself has grown tired of trying to reach me. My body remembers what it's supposed to do, wake, dress, eat, speak when spoken to, but my mind is elsewhere. Always elsewhere. Always clawing back to him. Vaughn.

Every inch of me was burning with the urge to chase him down, to board the next flight to New York, to storm into whatever place he's hiding in and shake him until he remembers who he belongs to. My hands twitched with the need, restless, useless without him in them. But I didn't. I stop myself every time. Because despite the turmoil my

mind sits in, I still have the rational to know that if I chase him too hard, if I force him when he's already pulling away, I'll drive him so far I'll never reach him again.

So, I've endured it. Suffered it. Each second without him carving deeper into me, but I've stayed away, just like he asked. It was a struggle at first, and I couldn't resist endlessly texting, calling, begging, despite how pathetic it felt to do so. But I finally relented after he asked me to stop, and so I just waited.

But then yesterday happened, that phone call. His voice cutting me open, his words ending us with the precision of a blade. I can't breathe when I think of it. It replays, over and over, stuck on loop until I want to smash my head against the wall just to silence it. How could he? How could he throw it all away, all we've bled and burned and built together? For what? For her? For a girl who betrayed him?

I don't understand. I can't. She cheated on him. She humiliated him. She made a fool of him, and I- I corrected that mistake. I wiped her from the world so her name would never cut his mouth again. And still he grieves her like I stole something sacred. He hates me for it. He refuses to see it was for him, always for him.

Fine. Fine. I'll admit it. I'll say I shouldn't have lied, shouldn't have kept it from him. That much I can give him. But I won't, I can't, say I regret killing her. She deserved it. She failed him. She failed the test. And Vaughn is mine. Mine to protect, mine to keep. If I had to do it again, I would. Without hesitation. Without shame.

So why can't he see that? Why can't he understand?

Now I sit here hollowed out, like something essential has been scooped from me and discarded. I don't know what to do with myself. I pace. I drink. I stare at the ceiling until dawn turns to dusk and back

again. Nothing helps. Nothing touches the ache.

Three days ago, Annie came to me, quiet and hesitant, obviously seeing my heartbreak, with the shipment details I'd asked for a week ago. It was everything I needed, perfectly, yet I still struggled to write out the report, and I still haven't called my father. I can't. I can't muster the strength to act like a son, like a boss, like anything but the shattered thing I've become.

I don't know what to do. Do I wait, let the silence stretch until it strangles me? Do I chase him down, consequences be damned? Do I sit here rotting, pretending I can exist without the one person who makes existence bearable?

I don't know. I've never not known before. And it terrifies me.

Because I am Yulian Dimitriev. I take. I control. I bend the world until it breaks. And yet, without Vaughn, I am nothing but a boy lost in the wreckage of his own making, clutching at the ghost of a voice on the other end of the line, praying for it to come back.

-

It takes me nearly an hour to press the call button. An hour of staring at the screen, thumb hovering, chest hollow, fighting with myself, clawing for some measure of composure before I hear his voice.

But I have to, I know I do. This is my role, my blood, my inheritance, and despite everything, it is still my dream, still what I want, so I tell myself to suck it up and press call.

The line clicks, but he says nothing, waiting for me to go first, and I do, presenting like a dog ready to heel.

"It's done," I say, "the missing shipment. I've gone through everything, compiled all the details, and I just sent them over. You should have it now."

I wait. For once in my life, I almost hope for silence. Silence, at least, I could mold into approval in my mind, but he doesn't give me even that small mercy.

"It took you long enough." His tone is flat and cutting. "Pathetic. Ridiculous, even, for how long it took you, and for what? For a report so riddled with gaps I could drive a truck through it."

My stomach knots and my jaw tightens. I force myself to breathe slow, even, trying not to let the words sink too deep, though they already do, because they always do.

"I compiled that report myself, I went through everything-"

"I know, I've already looked," he cuts in, dismissive, contempt bleeding into every word. "I looked the moment your useless email came through. And it's not good enough. How exactly can you expect to be my heir if you can't handle a simple task? If it weren't for others stepping in, I'd still be waiting. You had some stupid, nothing girl do half of it for you, only bothering to do the easy part yourself, and yet she still likely would have done a better job if you'd just have her do everything."

What the fuck? He fucking told me to use whoever I needed, whatever people I have, to sort out the issue. And now he's getting mad that I did so? He speaks about Annie's involvement like it's some fatal shame. I can never win with him. Never.

It makes no sense, but it never does, when it comes to him.

I want to argue with him. To demand how he knows I used Annie specifically, why it matters, why he twists rules that only a week ago were instructed to me. But the words don't come. They can't. My mouth is stone. My lungs burn with the effort of holding it all in, and still, still, I stay silent. Because fighting only makes it worse.

So I listen. I take it. I let him gut me, strip me, leave me hollow.

"You're a disappointment," he says finally, and it lands heavier than any bullet. "I gave you time, resources, freedom to prove you could lead. And you show me this? This… embarrassment? A child playing at business. If this is what you bring to the table, Yulian, then maybe I should be looking into other options."

The silence that follows feels eternal. My throat tightens, but no words come. There's nothing left to say. He's made sure of that.

I nod, though he can't see it, though it means nothing. My body's on autopilot again, desperate for some action, any action, to bridge the chasm of failure stretching wide beneath me. I want to say I'll do better, that I'll fix it, that I'll prove him wrong. The words sit heavy on my tongue, but I can't push them out. Because I don't believe them, not tonight.

And then I hear a click, and the line goes dead. He doesn't even give me the courtesy of ending it with words. Just silence.

I stare at the dark screen until my reflection stares back at me. A stranger. A son who is never enough. A man who has everything and

nothing.

And through it all, through the suffocating emptiness, through the splintered wreckage of his words, all I can think of is Vaughn. How he said he hated me more than he ever hated my father. My father, who treats me like *this*.

I don't know whose words echo louder, Vaughns, or my fathers. And I don't know which one is destroying me faster.

Hours go by, and I don't move. I don't look at my phone, I don't try turning on the TV, I don't do anything. I just sit, and I stare. Eventually, the door creaks open. I don't look up, but I hear the soft footsteps that after over a year, I've come to recognise. Annie doesn't ask if she join me, she just slides into the chair beside me and folds her legs up, casual in a way only she can be. Like she belongs in any room she chooses.

"I saw you sent the report off," she says, voice even but cautious. "I just wanted to check in. Was it… all okay? With your dad? Did he approve?"

For the first time, I think I even hear a hint of nervousness in her voice. It's extremely subtle, and different to how I've always seen her before. But this is the first proper project that she's carried out for me, at least one that's mafia related. She knows how important it is that she sets a good precedent, a good 'first impression', if you can call it that.

And so I don't even consider telling her the truth. I don't consider telling her about how my father tore into the work she did, tore into me, too. How he referred to her as nothing more than just a girl, and how I genuinely don't think he could have given less of a shit about the brilliant work she did.

Because Annie doesn't deserve that truth, not even close.

Because the *real* truth, the one I won't let him destroy, is that she did incredible work. She was efficient, precise, meticulous. She saw things even I might have missed. I might have put the final report together, yes, but it wouldn't have been possible without the huge amount of detail she provided from the investigation she did. Annie did *everything right.* And I'll be damned before I let her carry the weight of his poison.

So I lie.

"He approved," I say, keeping my voice flat. "Said it was great. Both the report and the investigation. Exactly what was needed, and more, even."

Annie studies me for a beat too long. Relief flickers across her face, followed quickly by suspicion and she has always been too perceptive for her own good. But she doesn't press, and whether that's for my sake or her own, I don't know. She just nods, shoulders easing a fraction.

"Good," she murmurs. "That's… good."

We sit in silence for a moment, until she finally tilts her head, eyes narrowing at me.

"You okay?" she asks.

“Yes,” I answer automatically.

Annie sighs, long and low. “That’s a lie.”

The words hang there, sharp and cutting because they’re true. She leans forward, elbows on her knees. “Why are you still here?”

I blink, confused. “What?”

“Why are you *here*,” she says again, gesturing around us, then pointing toward the window, the trees stretching endlessly into the island. “On this island. Why aren’t you in New York? Chasing after your man? The Yulian I know wouldn’t just sit here while Vaughn walks away.”

Her words lance through me. I open my mouth, close it again. There’s no easy answer. My throat feels raw just trying to form one.

“It’s… complicated,” I manage finally, the understatement of the year. My chest twists, guilt clawing up my ribs. “I fucked up really bad.”

Annie doesn’t flinch but simply stares at me expectantly. When I say nothing, she sighs and rolls her eyes. “Well, what did you do?”

I don’t even know why I say it. Maybe because the silence has been gnawing me alive, maybe because I need someone else to carry the knowledge, even just for a second. I would usually have gone to Mikahil for something like this, my lifelong best friend, but we’ve been so on the outs lately for obvious reasons. His guilty face every time I see him is enough not to make me entirely lose it on him, but it isn’t enough to make everything okay.

“Before we were together, he had a girlfriend, who I slept with,” I say, voice low, eyes on the floor. The words taste like acid. “Then after he dumped her for cheating with me, I killed her, made it look like a suicide, and then kept it a secret all this time.”

The room goes still.

Annie just… stares at me. Shock carved into every line of her face. Her lips part, close again. Then she lets out a slow, disbelieving laugh that holds no humour.

“Well, fuck,” she says, “you’re a piece of shit,” she says finally. “Like, actually an asshole.”

I’m actually a little taken aback for a moment, because while it might be true, I hadn’t expected her to say it so bluntly. Though I don’t know why I expected any different from Annie. My first instinct is to argue, to defend, to twist the narrative until I come out looking better. But the thing is… she’s right.

She’s completely right.

And Annie knows it. She leans back, crossing her arms. “You think I’m wrong?”

“No,” I admit, voice barely audible.

“Good. Because I’m not. You *are* a piece of shit. And because you’re a piece of shit, I expect you to work your ass off twice as hard to win

him back over."

My head jerks up, eyes narrowing. "What?"

"You heard me," she says firmly. "And when you do win him back, because you will, because you've never let go of what's yours in your life, I expect a proper introduction. Face to face. Because from what I've gathered, I've been dragged into more of your arguments about him than I can count, despite never meeting him, and I'd like to prove to him exactly how uninterested in you I actually am."

That jars something loose in me. I blink, then let out a rough laugh. "Uninterested? Really? Not even a little?"

Annie smirks slyly at me, letting her gaze drag slowly up and down me, then lands it squarely on my face, and her smile drops entirely. "No."

Her bluntness cuts through me so sharp it actually causes a barked laughter to come out of me. "Fair enough," I say. "And for what it's worth, I don't think it was ever about you. Vaughn just couldn't stand me being close to anyone. Period."

"Thank you, but that doesn't make me feel better," she says without missing a beat. "Because I never felt bad in the first place. I didn't do anything wrong."

That truly drags a loud laugh out of me, rough but real. I go to reply, but then I hear a soft voice call "it's been way too long since I heard that."

Both Annie and I turn our heads and see Tati stood in the doorway to the room, smiling brightly. She walks toward us and gives Annie a quick hug. “Thanks for that, by the way, I haven’t heard him laugh like that since you-know-you left.”

She wiggles her eyebrows at Annie, conveying the message, even though we all know exactly who she’s talking about. “Well, having Grumpy McSadness as a boss does make my job much more boring,” Annie replies pointedly.

Tati laughs and gives Annie another squeeze.

I look between them in confusion. “Wait…” I say, “when did you two become all buddy-buddy? I didn’t even know you guys knew each other past first names.”

The two women stay still for a moment, before exchanging pointed looks with one another, and bursting out laughing. I gape at them, for having an apparently silent conversation without me. When the hell did this happen?

“Er-hello?” I say, waving my hand at them, “your boss slash brother is right here, feeling very confused.”

However, rather than informing me of anything, they simply exchange another knowing look. “We’ll tell you another time,” Annie finally says, and Tati nods her head in agreement.

“Besides,” Tati adds, “we have much more important things to focus on, like getting my future brother-in-law back.”

I sigh, suddenly feeling down again at being reminded of him. Before I can stop myself, the words slip out. “I really miss him,” I admit.

Tati’s face softens, while Annie’s hardens. My sister wraps her arms around my neck from behind, leaning into me, while Annie says, “then why the hell aren’t you on a plane to New York?”

I drag a hand down my face. “Because if I push too hard, if I corner him, I’ll lose him for good. There won’t be any coming back.”

“I don’t think that’s possible,” Annie says simply. “I might not have met him, but I’ve seen enough. Heard enough. That man loves you. Completely. He couldn’t let you go if he tried.”

Tati tightens her arms around me. “And, as someone who *has* met him, though only briefly, I’d have to completely agree. Not to mention I’ve seen all those pictures you showed me of you guys together. The way he looks at you? There’s no way he’ll ever let you go. Not when he loves you that deeply. It’s not possible.”

“You’re wrong,” I mutter. The memory slams into me, Vaughn’s voice, broken but firm, telling me it’s over, that we can never work. “He ended it. Properly. Said we can never work. Just a few days ago.”

Annie doesn’t even blink. “Then why are you so worried about him staying away permanently if you chase him too hard?”

I freeze.

“What?”

She leans forward again, eyes burning into mine. “If he really ended it, if it’s really done… then why be so afraid of losing him by chasing him against his wishes?”

Her words slam into me, a truth I don’t want to hear but can’t deny. My heart hammers against my ribs, uneven and brutal. Because she’s right.

“What have you got left to lose?” Tati says behind me, and it’s like everything totally clicks into place.

They’re both so fucking right.

I don’t know why I’m so shocked, they always are.

And I realize, sitting there with Annie’s gaze pinning me down, my sister comforting me from behind, that I’ve been lying to myself. Telling myself there’s still a line left to cross, still a boundary I haven’t shattered. But Vaughn’s words echo in my skull, final and unyielding. *We’re done.*

If that’s true… then what the fuck am I still doing here?

-

I am on a plane not even an hour later.

No suitcase, no bag, not even a change of clothes. I don't bother. I don't think. Annie and Tati had still been speaking when I walked out the door, saying they would handle everything, telling me to just go.

It doesn't feel real. Not the flight, not the drive, not the blur of city lights bleeding against the window as the taxi pulls through New York. My body moves, my hands open doors, my feet walk steps, but my brain feels fogged, muted, thick as smoke. Every motion is automatic, instinct more than choice, like I've been wound up and set in motion and now I can't stop, not until I reach him.

And then, without me even realizing it, I am standing there.

Outside that warehouse.

The same one that Vaughn first invited me too, all those months ago. My stomach twists when I see it, remembering the things that happened in there, the things we spoke about the things we *did*.

This is where I felt, for the very first time, like I had him, really had him, in a way no one else ever could. Where he let me in, let me taste him, let me believe.

And it's also where he betrayed me. What a lifetime it's been since then.

And now here I am again.

I enter the warehouse and sit down, breathing hard, trying to steady the chaos clawing inside me. My fingers twitch until finally I drag my phone out of my pocket.

I can't use my number. He blocked me. But I've always been able to reach out if I needed to, I just chose not to. But that isn't an option anymore.

My thumbs hover over the screen, and I'm not sure what to write, what to say to persuade him to come. So I don't. I simply type the location, and add that it's from me, and that's it.

And then I hit send.

My heart is hammering so violently it hurts, like it's trying to break through my ribs and flee before the rejection can land.

And I wait.

-

My heart doesn't stop pounding the entire time I sit here. I don't know why, since if he doesn't show up, I plan on just hunting him down anyway. Doing all this is just about giving Vaughn the illusion of having a choice.

Eventually, though, after several hours of waiting, when I know it's now dark outside, and I've not received any confirmation that he's even seen the message, let alone chosen to act on it, I finally hear the warehouse door creak open.

I'm on my feet before I even know I've moved, pulse so loud in my ears it drowns out the silence between us. And then, there he is.

“Hi,” Vaughn says, voice on edge, like he doesn’t know what’s about to happen.

“Hi,” I answer, and the word comes out uneven, my throat thick, my mouth dry.

For a beat, neither of us knows what to do with the air between us. So much history, memories, ghosts, echo between us.

“You came,” I say finally, because I have to fill the space with something, anything.

“I told you to stay away,” Vaughn answers flatly. His arms fold over his chest, defensive, protective. “I told you we were done.”

“And yet, here you are,” I counter, stepping forward a fraction. “I suppose you aren’t as sure of that as you like to think, hm?”

I smirk at him, but he doesn’t take the bait. His jaw ticks, eyes narrowing, and doesn’t move. Instead, he asks, “What do you want, Yulian?”

“You.”

Vaughn scoffs, a sound sharp enough to cut. “Are you delusional?”

“Yes,” I admit, without hesitation, without shame. I let the truth sit

there, raw and ugly. “But not about this. We both know damn well you can never escape me, nor do you even want to. So there’s no point trying.”

His frustration is immediate, boiling over, making his voice crack. “Did you actually hear a single fucking thing I said on that call? Did you think about it for more than two seconds, or did you just decide that wanting me means nothing else matters?”

“It doesn’t,” I say, teeth clenched around the words like they’re the only shield I have. “Because that’s all that matters, we want each other.”

“Jesus Christ,” he mutters, and his voice wavers, breaking against tears he’s too proud to let fall. “Why can’t you just *listen*? Why can’t you actually think about what I’m saying, instead of bulldozing through like what you want is the only thing that’s important?” His hands rake through his hair, tugging hard, desperation etched into every line of him.

“I am listening,” I insist, but even I can hear how weak it sounds.

“No, you’re not,” Vaughn fires back. Then, point blank, his eyes lock on mine, unflinching, merciless. I see the wheels turning in his head, coming up with an idea. “Right now,” he demands, “call your father. Tell him you’re gay. Tell him you’re in love with me. Tell him you want to spend the rest of your life with me, and still be Pakhan, and everything that comes with it. Do it.”

I freeze. The silence stretches out, taut, unbearable. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth, throat tight, lungs refusing to pull in air. I can’t. I know it, he knows it.

“That’s what I thought,” Vaughn says, and the frustration in his voice guts me.

“Why don’t you do the same, then, if you think it’s so important? Call your father,” I echo back at him, nostrils flaring.”

Vaughn rolls his eyes. “No,” he states. “Because unlike you, I can actually admit how ridiculous it would be, can admit that it doesn’t work that way. So, I won’t call my father, and you won’t call yours. And that’s exactly why this will never work.

My confidence cracks, the certainty I wore like armour crumbling at my feet. I stumble for words, any words, and they come out stuttering, broken. “Maybe not right now… but we can figure something out, Vaughn, I swear we can-”

“Figure out what?” he explodes, his voice raw. “Even if we put aside the shit about duty, the mafia, the blood, everything. Yulian, you still haven’t fucking apologised for murdering my girlfriend.”

The air punches out of me. My mouth drops open, words lost. She- she fucking cheated on him. He didn’t love her, not like he loves me, how can he be so upset about it? I understand why he is so upset about the lying, but not why he is so upset about *her*.

“I-” I start, but nothing comes.

His chest heaves, his eyes wet and furious, his hands trembling at his sides. Vaughn seizes the moment and unleashes hell. His voice breaks into a ragged, furious rhythm, each word like a lash across my skin.

“You know what’s insane?” he spits, pacing two steps before turning back to me, eyes glassy, wild. “That we ever thought this, us, could actually work. That we thought we could just want each other enough and it would somehow erase everything else. Like our duties wouldn’t always come first. Like our families would ever accept this. Like you would ever be capable of something as fucking simple as apologising when you’re wrong.”

“I did apologise,” I protest, my words spilling too quickly, like I can plug the holes in a sinking ship with my bare hands. “I understand the lying,” I try, my voice strangled, desperate. “I understand keeping it from you was wrong, but-”

“But what?” His voice rises, echoing in the cavernous warehouse, breaking against the walls. “But killing her was fine? Justifiable? Righteous? No, you apologised for what *you* believe you did wrong. You refuse to take responsibility for what you still tell yourself was right, and that’s the problem, Yulian. That’s always the problem.”

Frustration floods through me at hearing him so upset over someone else. Not just anyone, but her. Who had him before I did, had him for years, in fact, only to betray him. I would never do what she did, why can’t he see that? “She *cheated* on you-” I try to say.

“For fucks sake Yulian!” Vaughn shouts, stepping closer now, fury in every line of his body “do you even get it? Do you even understand why I’m still *upset* about it? You keep acting like it’s nothing, like she was nothing, and maybe she was to you, but she wasn’t to me. You don’t get to decide what should matter to me.”

“I-”

“God, listen to us,” he interrupts again, his voice cracking, a laugh that isn’t a laugh bursting out of him. “We’re literally having the same

fucking conversation we had a week ago. Circles, Yulian. Endless circles. What are we even doing?"

My chest is tight, my palms damp, my whole-body tense with panic because I can see it, see him slipping further, see him convincing himself this is hopeless, and I can't, I can't fucking lose him. Not like this. Not after everything. Coming here was supposed to *save* us, not destroy us beyond repair.

"Vaughn-" I start, stepping forward, but he stops me dead with the blunt force of his next words.

"I asked you this a week ago, and you had nothing. So, tell me, what is different now? What miraculous idea have you come up with that can actually fix this," he demands, every word deliberate, his stare pinning me like a knife to the wall. "Prove that you are actually thinking this through, that you are being fucking logical. One real way we could actually be together. For the rest of our lives. Just one. You say you want this so bad? Fine. Then tell me how it works."

I blink, stutter, my mind scrambling for anything, anything at all. The silence stretches, humiliating, damning, and I know if I don't say something, right now, I'll lose him forever. My mouth opens, shuts, opens again. My mind races, but every path dead-ends. And then, cornered, drowning, I blurt out the only thing left: "Run away with me."

For a second, I almost believe it. The image flickers in my mind, me and Vaughn, anonymous, free, no chains around our throats, no knives pressed into our spines. For a second, I almost see it.

But Vaughn's expression shatters the illusion in an instant.

He sighs, heavy, exhausted, his face crumpling with something closer to grief than anger. He tilts his head at me, breath shaky, and I see the sympathy, the pity in his eyes. They shine wet, his lips trembling as he shakes his head. “You don’t mean that,” he says gently. “You love being heir. You love your empire. Being Pakhan is who you are, it always has been. There’s nothing in this world you want more.”

“I want you more,” I argue, and the words break out of me like a confession, like a plea. “More than all of it.”

But Vaughn only shakes his head harder, his tears finally spilling. “That might be true. Maybe some part of you really does want me more. But you’d be miserable. You’d rot away without the life you’ve been building for yourself since you were a child. A life that you’ve earned. You’ve given blood, sweat and tears for it. Endured terrible things for it. You *deserve* it, Yulian. Deserve it more than anyone.”

My mouth trembles as I say, “I could never be miserable with you.”

“Maybe not entirely,” Vaughn says with a sad smile, “but you’d miss every part of this life, your people, your power, your sister. And I…” His voice cracks again, and he presses the heel of his hand against his eye. “I couldn’t do that to you.”

The words knife through me, because he’s right. And I hate that he’s right. I want to scream that it doesn’t matter, that nothing could matter if he’s by my side, but the lie clogs in my throat before it can pass my lips. Because we both know it would be a lie.

I can’t run. Not really. Not when running would mean abandoning my sister, my family, the empire I was born to inherit. Not when it would mean forcing Vaughn to cut ties with the family he loves, the friends he’d bleed for. Running away is a fantasy, a desperate dream I clung to because it’s the only thing I could grasp in this moment, the only

thing that felt like an answer.

But it isn't an answer. It's a delusion. And Vaughn sees that clearer than I do.

"Do you see it?" he presses, stepping closer now, his voice hoarse but sharp. "Do you get it, Yulian? This is what I mean. You throw words at me like they're enough, like saying you want me more is supposed to fix anything. But it doesn't. Because at the end of the day, you're still you. And I…" He swallows, his throat bobbing, his voice breaking. "And I can't spend the rest of my life being something you'll regret."

We stand there, the silence between us thick enough to choke on, like it has substance, like the air itself is holding its breath along with me. My heart is pounding so violently I can hear it in my ears, each beat a reminder of what's at stake, each pulse screaming that I can't, I won't, let this end here, not like this.

Vaughn's eyes are fixed on the concrete floor, the dim light catching the sharp line of his jaw, the set of his shoulders so tense it makes me want to step closer and cradle the world back into his chest. I want to reach out, want to grab him and never let go, but I force myself to remain still, to let him have the space he needs, even if it kills me in the process.

And then, fuck, it hits me with crystal clarity. No. I'm not giving up. I will not let him slip through my fingers, not now, not ever. Not after everything we've been through. Not after the chaos, the obsession, the dark corners we've crawled through together.

No. I won't let it end like this.

I inhale, slow and deliberate, forcing my chest to expand and my voice

to steady even as it shakes. “Vaughn,” I say, my words slicing through the silence. He glances up at me, wary, his eyes red-rimmed and raw, and I can see the mix of fury, pain, and heartbreak etched across every line of his face. I swallow the lump in my throat.

I urge myself to mean it, to truly mean the words I say. I won’t say what he wants to hear because I want him to take me back, I will say them because I believe them, because I will be better for him. Because there is nothing I won’t do for him. “I… I am truly sorry. For everything I believe I did wrong, I am sorry. And I am sorry that I can’t understand why there are things that are wrong… that I don’t believe are wrong. But I want to. I want to try. For you.”

He looks at me like he wants to argue, like he wants to tell me it’s too late, that words are nothing against what’s already broken. I don’t flinch. I press on. “I know… I know we still have a million other problems. Problems we haven’t solved, things we haven’t faced, responsibilities that will never let us breathe easy. But… if we can start with one, just one… something manageable, something we can handle, then maybe… maybe we can figure the rest out too. I want this to work, Vaughn. I want us. More than anything.”

His expression falters, a flicker of something unreadable passing through his eyes, doubt, despair, maybe even a glimmer of hope, but I don’t give him time to respond.

“I’ve rented a hotel room,” I continue, my voice gaining steadiness, the words coming faster now, desperate to get them out before I can lose my nerve. “I’ll text you the address. I’ll tell them your name, and they’ll let you up. I’m not asking for an answer tonight. Take your time. Think. Breathe. Decide. But… tomorrow night, if you’re willing to fight for us, as much as I am, I want you to come. And I swear to you, I will listen. And we’ll start with one thing. And then we’ll go from there.”

Vaughn’s mouth opens slightly, then closes again. His chest rises and

falls unevenly. “It’ll never work,” he whispers finally, almost to himself, but I hear it loud and clear, like a blow to my chest. My stomach drops.

I press on, my words tumbling out in a rush now, a flood of desperation and hope all wrapped together. “I know there’s a lot to untangle. I know there’s history, and anger, and betrayal, and… and everything else that makes this messy, impossible even. But you once told me that we’ll always be on the communicating thing, and I know I brushed it off before, I didn’t see it the way you did. But now I’m willing to make myself see it. I’m willing to do whatever it takes.”

Vaughn swallows audibly, his throat working, his eyes glistening with unshed tears that make my chest ache. He doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even nod immediately. The silence stretches, heavy, oppressive, like the entire world has narrowed to the two of us in that dim, abandoned warehouse, and every heartbeat is a countdown.

And then, slowly, I turn, my heart hammering in my chest, my body buzzing with adrenaline and hope and fear all at once. “I’ll go,” I say softly. “I’ll go back to my hotel. I’ll wait. Tomorrow night. You decide. If you’re willing… I’ll be ready.”

With my back turned to him, I start walking away, toward the door. But when I hear his voice behind me, I freeze in place, staring straight ahead.

“Yulian…” Vaughn whispers, “it will never work. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

I close my eyes, squeeze them shut, willing the words to have never existed. I want to turn, to scream, to fight, to beg. But I don’t. Because there is nothing more I can do, nothing more I can say. Now, I have to leave it all up to him.

So, I just breathe, one breath, then two. Then, without turning around, without facing him again because I don't think I have the strength to, I say:

"I'll be waiting. I'll always be waiting."

And then I walk away.

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The penthouse is quiet, save for the faint hum of the city far below, the lights of New York stretching like a glittering river in every direction. I'm facing the floor-to-ceiling windows, arms crossed, staring down at the streets that look impossibly small from this height, and yet everything feels impossibly big inside me.

The darkness presses in, the night air filtered through the glass making the room feel colder than it should, even though the heating is on.

I told him night, Vaughn. I gave him time. I told him to think. I gave him the courtesy of a choice, and now, standing here in the penthouse I rented, alone, I feel the weight of all that hope crushing me.

I close my eyes for a moment, trying to swallow the pit in my stomach, trying to will myself to believe that maybe he's coming, that maybe he's just testing me, that he's thinking, planning, gathering courage. But every rational thought, every small piece of reason inside me screams the same thing: he's not coming.

Because the truth is that it's late. Very late. I might have told him night, but I've waited, and I've waited, and I've waited.

And he's not coming.

The seconds stretch into minutes. My hands ball into fists, then loosen again. I pace. I mutter under my breath, fragments of apologies, fragments of promises, fragments of everything I ever wanted to say to him and never could. I glance at the clock. Every second drags, every tick like a hammer against my ribs.

And then, just as the thought solidifies in my mind that it's over, that the choice is his and he's chosen without me, that I've lost him forever, there's a sound.

A soft, almost innocuous ding, and I recognise it as the sound of the elevator to my room. I freeze in place, my chest locking up, my heart slamming against my ribs.

Another moment passes, the kind of slow, stretched out second that makes time feel liquid. And then I hear it: the faint whir of the elevator doors sliding open.

I turn. My body almost moves before my mind catches up, almost launching me toward the sound, toward him, before I even register what I'm doing.

And there he is. Standing there in the elevator, staring straight at me.

Vaughn.

Chapter End Notes

thank you for reading and i hope you enjoyed!
i know it was painful but remember the happy ending tag haha. i cant believe there are less than ten chaps left. i reallllyyyy want to finsih this before i start back at uni, which is the end of this month, so i am actually going to try so hard to write as much/ quick as i can. it definitely wont be as long until the next chap that this one took.
thank you for all the support as always, if you have any questions or theories or anything you wanna say about the fic/rinaverse in general, my tumblr is lucsf19 :).
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Chapter Thirty

Chapter Notes

> hi guys. i know it has been quite a while, and im super sorry about that. if you have been keeping up with my tumblr, i moved into my new place and there was no wifi. what followed was about a million things going wrong and i only recently got it. it is still in fact terrible. it is slow and losing connection constantly, but at least it is there lol.
> luckily, i have still been writing since i obvs dont need wifi to use word, so you are getting multiple chapters at once. i know ao3 goes down tomorrow, so you can download the fic if you dont have time to read it all now.
> also, i would appreciate it if you could read what i have to say at in the end notes :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Vaughn

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The elevator doors slide shut behind me with a muted hiss, the quiet whir of the cables above and below seeming unnaturally loud in the confined space. Yulian stands opposite me, just standing, his hands in his pockets, his posture relaxed yet impossibly tense all at once, and I feel my chest tighten.

We stare at each other for a long moment, two pieces of glass trying to reflect something neither of us is ready to say.

“Hi,” I finally manage, the word comes out choked and full of emotion, weighted with all the fractured tension I feel coiling around my ribs.

“Hi,” he replies softly, voice low, careful, like he’s testing the air before stepping too far into it. His gaze doesn’t waver from mine, but I can see the flicker in his eyes, the unease, the nervous edge beneath the mask of calm he tries so hard to maintain.

“I didn’t think you’d come,” he admits after a moment, and there’s a faint, almost sheepish lilt to his tone that is unlike him.

I swallow, my throat dry, and let out a short, bitter laugh. “Almost didn’t,” I admit, “Gareth… he made me see it differently, though. Changed my mind.”

“Ah,” Yulian says, a slow smile creeping across his face. “Then I suppose I owe Gareth my thanks, don’t I?” There’s a teasing quality to it, but not enough to fully mask the underlying tension. He shifts slightly, and for a moment I feel the room tighten around us, charged with everything we’ve said, everything we haven’t.

We fall silent after that, the kind of awkward, fragile silence that stretches into something almost unbearable. I try to sort my thoughts, to line up what I want to say, what I need to say, but the words get caught in my throat, tangling with the emotions I’ve been stuffing down for days, maybe weeks, now.

Finally, I exhale a long, shaky sigh, letting some of it out in a whisper.

“I should-” I begin, but Yulian cuts me off, his voice calm yet firm, a gentle command that still carries the weight of his authority, his presence.

“I want to say something,” he says simply, like it’s non-negotiable, and I pause, nodding, because I know that tone.

He speaks with measured cadence, deliberate words, each one landing like a careful, cautious step across fragile glass. “Vaughn,” he starts, “I know I fucked up. Bad. I never meant to hurt you, I promise. But I… I really find it hard to understand why you’re so upset about her. About someone who cheated on you, about Camilla dying. I can’t see it the way you do, and I know that makes me seem callous, or cold, or worse. And well, I suppose I am those things, but I had always hoped I was different with *you*. But I can see that you’re upset, I can see the weight of it, and even though I don’t understand it fully… I’d like to try. If you’re willing to give me that grace, I want to try.”

His eyes meet mine, earnest, open, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I can see the part of him that’s willing to step into my world, even if it terrifies him. Even if he doesn’t yet fully comprehend it.

“There are no guarantees,” he continues, his voice gaining a quiet intensity. “I don’t have ideas, solid plans, or a roadmap for how this works, not yet. But that doesn’t mean there aren’t any. It doesn’t mean we can’t find them. I know I’m not perfect. I know I’ve bulldozed; I’ve made mistakes, I’ve hurt you, but I want to do better. I want to improve my communication, to work with you, to figure out if there’s a way we can make this work. Together.”

The room seems to shrink around me, my chest tightening so sharply I almost wince. And yet, under the pressure, under the weight of everything that has come before, I feel a flicker, just the smallest spark, of tiny, fragile, dangerous hope.

“I…” I start, my voice rough. My throat is tight, the words tasting like iron. “…I think I can try. But Yulian, there’s so much more than just Camilla. So much more. Our past, our… the basement, the things we never fully worked out, the choices we have to make about our families, about how we… coexist. There’s still so much to untangle before this can even be considered possible.”

He nods slowly, voice soft, deliberate. “I have all the time in the world when it comes to you, Vaughn. Anything you want to discuss? Consider it done. I’ll work with you on it, through it, over it, under it, whatever it takes. I’m willing.”

I can feel the intention behind his words, and I think that maybe, just maybe, we can actually work through this. Not because he’s forcing it, not because I’m surrendering entirely, but because there’s a willingness there. A readiness to meet me halfway.

The room, despite its open plan, feels smaller, tighter, but the tension has dissipated. It’s no longer entirely mine, or entirely his.

“Then…” I breathe out slowly, letting the words stretch into the space between us. “We’ll see what we can do. But we start slow. We go through every piece, every problem, every… everything, step by step.”

It’s probably ridiculous, I know. But I’m almost desperate to gain a semblance of the control I’ve been losing for the last week. Taking things slowly, discussing them in depth, looking at every angle, makes me feel like I’m taking that control back.

He takes a step toward me, a faint smirk tugging at the corners of his mouth, but his eyes are serious, anchored and deliberate. “We’ll communicate. I promise you. I’ll meet you halfway, every step of the way.”

I nod, feeling the tight coil of anxiety in my chest loosen fractionally.

“Okay,” I say. “Where do you want to start?”

Yulian looks at me, then his eyes dart around the room. “Why don’t we sit?” he offers, gesturing to the small seating area. I nod, and we move to the largest sofa. He sits down on the left side, his body turned toward the right. I sit beside him, crossed legged and my body entirely facing his, leaving a small space between us.

“What-” I go to say, but Yulian blurts out before I can finish “You really didn’t want her dead?”

I blink, caught off guard. The look on his face isn’t one of jealousy, surprisingly, but genuine curiosity, as if he truly is ready to understand, to hear what I have to say. I *can* see why he is so confused. In our relationship, betrayal has burned hotter than anything else, and he is trying to reconcile that idea with me supposedly letting hers go.

“When it first happened,” I say, steady, deliberate, forcing the words out slowly, “I did. I imagined it… more than once. The thought of her gone, the satisfaction I might get from it… it came to me. Hell, I fantasised about it, how I might drag it out, ruin her life first, show her exactly what happens when you hurt me that deeply.”

I can see his jaw twitch. “But… it’s been a long time since then. As much as it hurt, what she did, I can remember the good things now, too. And… I don’t think I would have ever actually gone through with it. I just… when it came down to it, I don’t think I could have done it. The betrayal ran deep at the time, yes, but I thought I was in love with her. Now, I realise I was nowhere near.”

His eyes widen at my implication, despite me having already said it once. He’s silent for a moment and I can see the turmoil behind those sharp, calculating eyes. He’s testing me, pushing for some admission that I feel nothing for her, that it was easy to erase her from my life. But that’s not the truth.

“I know that might be hard for you to hear,” I continue, voice low, careful, deliberate, “but I really did care about Camilla. I wasn’t in love with her, but she… she had been a part of my life longer than you had. We were friends first, long before anything else. We dated for years; she was my first everything. And even when she betrayed me, she… she was always good to me before that. She… she deserved better than the end she got. She deserved better than dying because someone else couldn’t control themself.”

Yulian’s eyes sharpen. There’s a twitch in his jaw, a tightness, but he says nothing. I can feel him processing, struggling to understand without judging, as hard as it must be. I press on, needing him to get it. “Mostly… it’s because of her that I learned to control my anger, my IED, at least before you came back into my life. She was patient, *relentless* in her patience, in a way I’ll never forget. She researched, she learned how to respond, how to calm me down, how to help me before I hurt myself, or anyone else. She wasn’t a bad person. She made bad choices, yes, but she didn’t deserve to die.”

It’s odd how I quite literally see the understanding dawn in his eyes. I hadn’t even realised when I came to recognise his emotions, his thoughts so well, so easily. He’s quiet, and I take that as a sign that he’s letting it sink in. I add, carefully, softly, “Do you understand that now? That it was mostly to her I owed something… that it wasn’t hers to lose to you? I was going to marry her, or at least, I thought I was. She may have been nothing to you, Yulian, but she wasn’t nothing to me. Just because you don’t know that, doesn’t mean it wasn’t real. That history wasn’t yours to erase.”

He swallows, shoulders hunched slightly, as though he’s carrying a weight heavier than he’s ever allowed himself to bear. Finally, he meets my gaze, and it’s not the Yulian I know when he’s confident, when he’s imposing. This is raw, small, fractured, and I see the shadow of real remorse behind his usual arrogance.

“I… yes,” he says, voice low. “I understand.” It still comes out slightly

begrudgingly, like he doesn't completely want to say it, but that doesn't mean he doesn't mean it. And so while he might struggle to apologise, it doesn't mean his apology is any less real. There's a pause, a beat of silence, and then he finally says it, words that are almost swallowed by the room itself: "I'm sorry. For killing her, and for lying about it."

I watch him, every inch of him strained with the effort of speaking the truth. "I… I don't think I can ever force myself to regret it completely," he admits, but I don't flinch, because I was expecting this. "A part of me… the obsessive part, will always be… happy, I guess, that I'm the only one alive to have had you in that way. But… I understand now that she was more to you than just some girl, and… it wasn't my place to take her from this world."

I lean forward and take one of his hands in my own, linking them together. "Thank you," I say, voice small but sincere.

Yulian's gaze lingers on me, sharp but strangely vulnerable, and I can tell from the way his jaw works that there's something pressing against his lips, something he's been holding back. Finally, he exhales, slow and deliberate, and says, "There's something else I want to tell you. To reassure you."

My brows knit. "Reassure me?"

"Yes." His voice softens, though the edge of nervousness clings to it. "I know I lied about Camilla, and it was a pretty big lie, but I've admitted that, and I'll keep admitting it. But I want you to know that everything I told you about what happened in the basement, the night you tried to escape… that was the truth. I wouldn't lie about that, Vaughn. I couldn't."

I'm a little taken aback at first, not expecting him to say that. It hadn't

even crossed my mind to doubt anything else he had told me. Especially not that. I shake my head, almost smiling despite the gravity of everything. “Yulian… of course I know you were telling the truth about that. It was never in question for me.”

His shoulders slacken, the taut string of his posture easing like he’d been waiting to exhale for hours. He looks down for a moment, lips pressing together, and murmurs, “Good.” Just that, a single word carrying more relief than he probably intended to show me.

I lean back slightly, my eyes flicking to the vast expanse of glass framing the glittering skyline behind him, and then back to him again. “We should probably keep talking about how we can make… us work. Long term.”

His gaze snaps back up, as though I’ve just handed him something he didn’t dare hope for. “Yes,” he says immediately, with no hesitation. “We should.”

“Alright,” I say, dragging in a breath, steadying myself because this is the part where logic has to take the wheel, where structure matters more than anything. “So let’s start with the obvious. You’re based in Chicago. I’m based in New York. That’s already a problem.”

“Then we make a deal,” Yulian answers without missing a beat.

I blink at him. “A deal? What kind?”

He tilts his head, a ghost of a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. “You made a complex deal with the Irish not too long ago, didn’t you? We can do the same. With each other. It will be easier, actually. We’re already bratva. Just different branches.”

I narrow my eyes, scepticism curling in my gut. “And you think our families, our men, will just go for that? That easily?”

“Not at all.” he admits, “it won’t be easy to do straight away. I know that. But that’s okay, because we don’t need it to happen all at once. We can take our time, slowly integrate our branches, our organizations. Build trust and foundation and whatever else is needed. And eventually… maybe even reach the point where there is no separation anymore. Where there is just one. One singular, large branch, ruled together out of both cities.”

My heart pounds harder, because he is no longer just talking about logistics and plans, he’s talking about an actual life, a permanent future that we can have *together*.

“And then,” he continues, his voice softer, “one day, our child will inherit both as one. To rule over entirely.”

The air is stolen from my lungs. My lips part, but no sound comes out at first. We had mentioned children before, yes, but always in the logical sense, as part of our duty and how we can work around the child needing to be from both our families. But the way he says it now, it isn’t about having a child for the sake of continuing our legacy, but because we *want* one. We want a family.

I stare at him, the image searing itself against my brain, and for a long moment, I can’t move, can’t breathe. He speaks like a child is completely inevitable, like it’s already written. But then the rational part of me, the part that always claws back, pushes out the words that catch in my throat. “How exactly do you think that’s going to happen? We’re two men, Yulian. You know how our world thinks. If we have a child, both families are going to want it to be *their* blood, not the other’s. So which one is it going to be?”

The silence stretches for a moment, thick and suffocating, and for once, Yulian looks like he doesn't have an immediate answer. He sighs, the sound heavy, his chest rising and falling as his gaze softens, turning almost gentle. "I don't know."

He retakes my hand in his, stroking it softly as if preparing me for what he is going to say. "Vaughn… I understand you, I really do." he goes on, voice low, careful, as though he knows every word is walking a thin line with me. "I understand how important control is to you. How important structure is. I know you want to have everything laid out, every detail accounted for. But… sometimes, it's okay not to know. To figure it out later, as we go along. We don't have to have every answer right now."

I shake my head slightly, my instincts bristling at the suggestion. "You can't just say we'll figure it out later. That's not how this works. This isn't some small thing we can improvise, this- this is everything. This is our legacy, our future. It matters."

"Yes, it does matter," he agrees, "but children… they're a long way off. That's not where we are right now. We don't need to fight about it tonight. What we need is to agree that when the time comes, we'll have the discussion. We'll figure it out then. *Together*. Because right now, what matters is us, you and me, making this work."

I grit my teeth, my mind screaming that he's being careless, reckless, that he's throwing words into the wind with no weight behind them. And yet… a part of me knows he's right. A part of me knows that if he's sitting here, meeting me halfway, having these discussions just like I need, then maybe I owe him the curtesy of doing the same.

I take a slow breath, staring at him, his expression steady, open in a way that makes my chest ache. "I don't like shelving things," I admit, "you know that. I hate not having an answer, not having a plan."

“I know,” he murmurs.

“But…” I sigh, my throat tight. “If you’re willing to meet me halfway, maybe I need to be willing too. So… fine. We’ll shelve it. For now.”

Relief flickers across his face, softening his features, and he nods. “Good.”

“So… what do we do for now? Our child will inherit both,” he says, “And we’ll rule together until then. But…” He pauses, searching my face. “How the fuck are we supposed to do that when we’re in different states?”

I pause, considering it for a moment. When I come to a conclusion, I know he isn’t going to like it, but it is really the only option we have. “Well, if we plan to join our branches together, then we only need one headquarters,” I say. “And we will both move there permanently, together.”

Yulian gives me a deadpan look. “And I suppose you think it should be in New York, not Chicago?”

I sigh. “It makes more sense, Yulian. It’s closer to Europe, to Ireland, to the ocean. Chicago doesn’t have that. I know it’s not fair, but-”

“But it’s logical.” He finishes for me, jaw tightening. He doesn’t like it, but he can’t argue it either. “I hate that you’re right. And, I suppose you have a hell of a lot more family there than I do in Chicago.”

I squeeze his hand. “We’ll make our own family,” I tell him. “Plus, if we get married, my family will be your family, too.”

Yulian scrunches his nose. “It’ll be a cold day in hell before I consider any of your Heathens ‘family’.”

I throw my head back and laugh, rolling my eyes.

“We should probably have some sort of schedule until we make the move permanent,” Yulian decides. Then begrudgingly, he adds, “I suppose having time apart is just something we have to accept as part of our future roles as heirs and Pakhans.”

Choosing to ignore how much he clearly dislikes that idea (because, honestly, I hate it too), I continue the idea by saying “for now, at least, we could do two weeks in New York, two weeks in Chicago and so on. After a while, when things feel more secure, we could change it to three weeks in New York, one in Chicago until we fully establish the headquarters in New York, at which point we move permanently to New York.”

Yulian frowns. “What happens to Chicago then?”

“We’ll still oversee it from afar,” I explain. “But we can appoint someone trusted and skilled to lead and supervise in absence. Someone who will keep in close contact with us and communicate everything that happens well.”

“And who will that be?”

I pause for a moment, considering it. Finally, I say “I don’t know.” Yulian smiles almost curiously, tilting his head. “It will be years from now we have to appoint anyone. We don’t know what loyalties we’ll have, who we might meet, might trust. So, it can be something we don’t have to think about right now.”

Yulian nods his head, a proud smile on his face, recognising my efforts to meet him halfway, just like I said I would.

“Obviously, we will need to discuss the schedules and whatnot with our Pakhans first, but going to them with an initial idea and plan will help,” I add.

Yulian’s smile drops and he says “Vaughn… my father, he won’t accept us. He will never accept you and me. Ever.”

My eyes narrow at him. Everything else, the schedule, the headquarters, are logistics we can solve. But this isn’t something that simple.

“Well,” I say carefully, “this is not a thing we can just put on hold. He is your Pakhan. We need his consent, approval, support, whatever you want to call it, to even begin any of the things we’ve talked about.”

“Well, what about your parents?” Yulian asks quickly, and I force myself not to get frustrated with him. I can clearly see him trying to change the subject, trying to avoid talking about it. But, perhaps with me discussing it first, he’ll feel more compelled to open up too.

I sigh. “Accepting us has never really been something I’ve worried about, to be honest, in regard to my parents. I never questioned what they might think of me if I came out. They love and support me, no matter what. I’ve always known that. It was the fact that I knew they

would support me in spite of everything, the bombing, our families' histories, being men, everything, that made me not want to tell them. Because I felt guilty for causing all this trouble for them. They'll go to war for me, but I don't want them to have to."

I see a hint of what might be jealousy or sadness in Yulian's eyes might be, jealousy at how I grew up with such fiercely loving parents who will support me in everything, while Yulian hasn't known the love of a parent since the day his mother died.

"But, no matter how much it pains me to ask them to do this for me, I don't have a choice anymore. Not with how I feel about you. You are worth it, Yulian. Every time."

He smiles at me and presses a kiss to my hand. I look at him expectantly, making it clear with just my expression that I now expect him to go on.

His jaw clenches, but he still says nothing. Rubbing my hand against my face, I realise that I'm going to have to take the lead here.

Yulians father has always been such a complicated topic for him. Despite how he treated Yulian and his sister, he is still their dad, who raised him into the man he is today. If anyone else in the world treated me or hurt me in the way Yulians father did, Yulian would tear them to pieces. But when it comes to his father, it's like he reverts back to the scared young boy who felt unable to defend himself against his father's fists.

"Well, if we can't make him accept us, then how about removing him altogether?" I suggest.

Yulian flinches at the suggestion, recoiling with such reflex I frown

sadly at the childlike, instinctual grief at even the suggestion. “No,” he says quickly, vehement, and for a hot second I misread the sincerity for cowardice. “No. You don’t overthrow my father. It’s impossible. And even if it weren’t, I don’t want that.”

I don’t correct him in the fact that when I said remove, I meant something more permanent than just overthrowing him, something that would be eliminating Anatoly from this world altogether. But it doesn’t even cross Yulian’s mind that this could be what I was getting at, and judging how he reacted to thinking I just wanted to overthrow his father, it’s probably for the best.

His face is adamant, but the quickness of his answer goes beyond reason and strikes something raw. “You don’t remember what he did?” I ask, because I don’t have patience for false sentiment here. “Do you not remember basement? The bombs? My home being blown to pieces? What he did to my people? To my family?”

Silence presses up between us and his mouth stays open for a fraction, then he says quietly, “I know. I hate him too.”

“Then why is it so hard for you to betray him? To remove him?” I press.

“Why is it so hard for you to get over Camilla after she betrayed you?” Yulian throws back at me, looking me dead in the eye. I know he says it to hurt me, but I refuse to let him.

“Those are not the same thing, and you know it. Camilla betrayed me once after being good to me our entire lives. Your father has done nothing but abuse you. Hell, if you don’t want to do it, I’ll happily fucking kill him for those scars he put on you.”

He doesn't respond immediately, and I can read his face: the kid who admired the monster that raised him, the man who feared the fallout of rebellion, the son caught between blood and love. "What if I can get him to apologize," he says, fumbling for a gut-level solution, "to accept us? What if I can make him see it differently?"

I laugh, low and humourless. "Did you not *just* say that he would never accept us, no matter what? And what, even if he miraculously did, you think an apology will solve everything? You think a man who authorised those attacks will humbly step aside after saying he's sorry? That he'll give you the power you're asking for? That he'll allow you to be… you?"

I shake my head. "I won't work with him Yulian. And my friends and family certainly won't either. Not after all he has done. When I mentioned talking to our Pakhans earlier, I meant *you* and my father. Because the only way this works is if you take that position for yourself, right now."

My gaze settles on him for a few moments, taking in his expression. "Don't you hate him?" I ask.

He looks me in the eye. "More than anything."

I lean forward again, gripping his hand tightly. "Come back with me. To meet my parents. I will introduce you properly, and we can tell them everything, present a united front. We will talk to our other high-ranking members together and come up with a plan. But this won't work if he is still sitting on his throne."

He hesitates for a heartbeat too long. I can see the calculation in his eyes: the politics, the blood. He's thinking it through the risk, the betrayal, the loss. He bows his head. "I hate him," he whispers. "But I'm not sure I have it in me to pull the trigger."

“You don’t have to pull the trigger.” I say it quietly, the pragmatism of my voice sharpening. I absolutely despise it, hate that I’m actually considering allowing that monster to live. But, for Yulian, I’m realising there are few things in this world I’m not willing to do for him. “There are other ways. We can isolate him politically. We can offer an alternative that’s cleaner, less violent. All I ask is that you must be prepared to make a choice.”

He nods slowly, the motion hesitant yet decisive: small, perhaps, but real.

“You would let him live?” he asks.

“I would,” I say, and there is iron in my voice.

“Then okay,” he relents.

“Okay?” I repeat.

“Okay.”

There’s a beat of something between us, fragile and tentative and hopeful. And before I can talk myself out of it, I lean forward, closing the distance between us and pressing my lips to his.

The first contact startles us both. Despite only being a week or so, after months of constant touch, our time apart has been agony for us both. He answers, hard and hungry, and for a heartbeat the world narrows into our mouths and the narrow space between our bodies.

-

Yulian

-

Vaughn’s mouth is warm against mine, familiar and desperate. It’s been too long. I sink into the kiss like a man who’s been starved, pressing closer, parting his lips with mine, taking what I’ve been missing for months, maybe years.

His body is turned sideways on the sofa, legs crossed beneath him, his knee brushing against my thigh as he leans in. I can taste his breath, feel the low hum in his chest when I slide my hand up his jaw, into his hair, pulling him closer.

The thought hits me sharp, possessive: it’s been far, far too long since I’ve claimed him. Since he’s claimed me.

I shift forward, climbing into his lap. It feels a little awkward, I’m heavier, broader, but he doesn’t seem to care. His hands close hard on my waist, steadying me, pulling me down against him. Our kiss turns rougher, more desperate. His teeth catch my bottom lip, and I groan into him, threading my fingers through his hair, tugging just enough to hear that sharp little intake of breath I’ve missed so much.

His chest is solid beneath me, his heartbeat drumming fast against my palm as I press it flat to him. My other hand roams, down his shoulder, over his arm, across his back. I want to feel him everywhere, remind myself this is real, he’s here, with me. His hands are no less greedy, sliding under my shirt, fingers skimming up my spine, hot and demanding.

We don't stop kissing as we fumble to stand, as we stumble toward the bed. It's messy, clumsy even, neither of us willing to break apart for more than a second at a time. Shirts come off, tossed somewhere across the room. Shoes kicked away. I don't even remember pulling his belt open, but then his jeans are half down his thighs and he's laughing against my mouth, breathless, and I can't stop.

I don't want to.

By the time we reach the edge of the bed, there's nothing left between us. I fall backward onto the mattress, pulling him with me. He lands on top, pinning me, mouth devouring mine, our bodies pressed skin to skin. The heat of it sears me, his weight, his taste, his scent filling every space I've been empty.

He kisses me harder, then pulls back just barely, his lips brushing mine as he asks, low, rough, "You have any lube?"

"Yes," I manage, voice ragged. "In my bag."

He moves away reluctantly, and I watch the muscles of his back shift as he bends, rummaging. Even then, my hands twitch with the urge to drag him back down, not let him go even for a second.

When he climbs back on top of me, small bottle in hand, I grab him by the back of the neck and kiss him again, tasting that same hunger mirrored in him.

He opens me slow and gentle, entirely different from what we're used to. But here, decorated in the New York lights shining through the window, thick air all around us, and finally being able to feel one another again for the first time in what feels like centuries, it feels entirely *right*.

It feels like hours pass between each finger he gives me. I moan and groan and beg and plead. He whispers low in my ear, switching between dirty grunts and sweet nothings. By the time he's got three fingers inside me, I'm a sweaty, exhausted mess.

"Patience, Zmejka," Vaughn murmurs to me as I writhe beneath him. His lips wrap around one of my peaked nipples, sucking hard before licking all over, sending shivers up my spine. My thighs shake from how far apart they're spread.

When he's finished worshipping my other nipple, his head rises up to lean in close to mine, keeping eye contact as his wrist finally picks up its pace. We breathe the same air, I can feel the warmth of his breath against my lips, my mouth wide open in pleasure, unable to form proper words or sentences.

Finally, he captures my lips with his own, scissoring his fingers to ensure I'm fully prepped. When he pulls his fingers from me, I feel utterly empty. The only thing reassuring me is the knowledge of what I'm about to get instead.

"You want me?" Vaughn whispers into my mouth.

"Please," I reply, staring up at him through hooded eyes.

His cock pushes into me then, and though it's not often I let him take the dominant role in our sex life, in this moment, I feel utterly at his mercy, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

We both groan low in our chests as he slides in deep. His hands massage my body as he does, running all over my sides, my stomach,

my thighs, anywhere he can reach, as if he can never get enough of me.

I feel his balls hit my ass as we both relax, basking in the complete stillness around us. My legs are wrapped around his waist, holding him close to me. I don't need to. He wouldn't go anywhere else even if he could.

One of my hands, which had been wrapped around his back, slides up and tangles in his hair, squeezing the strands and pushing his head downward until our foreheads meet. We are so close it feels like I'm staring into his soul.

Vaughn's hips rock once, then twice, as he never fails to keep eye contact, to keep our bodies and minds connected in a way we've never felt before.

The sounds of our pleasure along with the slapping of skin fill the air, and in these moments, I'm able to forget about everything else. About all our responsibilities, all our problems. My entire world narrows down to just *Vaughn*.

As his thrusts pick up space, his head buries itself in my neck, sucking what I can only imagine will be dark purple marks into my skin. He starts at the top of my jaw, trailing down toward my collarbone, then back up on the other side.

When he's finished, I grab him by the nape, forcing him to look me in the eyes. "I want to ride you," I gasp into his mouth. His hips stutter as his eyes darken with lust. He nods, pulling out and rolling over.

I find myself desperately missing the feeling of being filled by him, needing, *craving* his closeness again.

Vaughn backs up until he is sitting straight up against the headboard, holding his arms out for me. I quickly move toward him, climbing into his lap so that our entire torsos and chests are pressed against each other.

Our lips find each other on instinct, claiming and demanding. His arms wrap around me, pulling me impossibly closer, like he can never get enough. My own hand reaches between us, wrapping around his wet cock and giving it a few pumps. Vaughn groans, deep and low, dropping his head to my shoulder.

Lifting myself up, I position him at my entrance before dropping down slowly, taking in the pleasurable stretch. When I'm fully sat down in his lap, our foreheads press together as we simply bask in one anothers presence for a moment. Our breaths are heavy and full of hunger.

Finally, when the urge to move, the urge to take what I need becomes too much, I rise deliberately before dropping myself down again. We both moan as I build into a leisurely pace. Unlike our times before, we aren't necessarily chasing our highs or building specifically to our orgasms. Rather, we take the moment to just acknowledge the other is here, together.

After a while, my thighs start to burn, and I use whatever energy I have left to pick up the pace, silently telling Vaughn that I'm getting close. Vaughn responds in kind, bucking his hips up in time with mine coming down so I'm doing less work.

Our lips must be beyond swollen and red by down, but it doesn't stop us from practically trying to eat one another.

“Fuck, I’m so close,” Vaughn murmurs into my mouth.

“Then fucking come, Mishka,” I hiss back at him, sucking on his lips as I feel warmth fill me and Vaughn’s hips stammer. The feeling of being filled by him sends me over the edge as I growl his name, riding him through my high.

Despite being finished, we remain in this position for several minutes, our entire bodies pressed together, arms wrapped around one another.

Finally, when I presume Vaughn is struggling to handle the overstimulation on his cock, he turns us to place me gently on my back on the bed beside him, pulling our as he does so. My eyes close and I hear Vaughn slip from the bed, his feet padding lightly as I presume he walks into the bathroom, returning with a warm cloth.

Once he finishes cleaning the both of us, he crawls into bed with me, laying his head on my chest and curling into my side. My Mishka won’t admit it, but he loves being the little spoon, resting in my arms and feeling safe there.

Then, we fall asleep.

-

My eyes blink open blearily to darkness, telling me it’s only been a few hours since we fell asleep, since the morning light hasn’t come yet. The skyline beyond the windows is black glass and scattered city light.

I quickly realise that the reason I’ve woken up is due to the sound of

my ringing phone on the bedside table. Vaughn stirs beside me at the sound too, groaning low in his throat as he shifts from where his head still rests on me, the sheets pulling away from his bare shoulders.

I reach blindly for the nightstand. The screen burns against my eyes when I drag it close. My chest goes tight when I see the name.

Father.

For a second, I don't move. I just stare at the glow, my pulse thudding heavier with every vibration. Vaughn blinks groggily, then follows my gaze. His expression hardens instantly, sleep gone.

"Don't answer it," he mutters, voice rough.

I swallow, my thumb hovering. "I should at least see what he wants."

"You don't need to see what he wants," he snaps quietly. "We just talked about this. About getting rid of him. You don't owe him your time, or your words, or anything."

I keep staring at the screen, the buzz rattling in my hand, drilling into my skull. "If I don't answer, he'll be furious."

Vaughn exhales sharply through his nose and mutters "he'll be furious when he finds out his son is planning to overthrow him, too."

I ignore him. My stomach twists as I swipe my thumb across the screen, lifting the phone to my ear.

“Hello?” My voice comes out a bit groggy from the sleep.

The voice on the other end is immediate, harsh and biting. “Why do you sound tired?” he snaps, no greeting, no pause. “It’s nearly midday there. You’re not still in bed like a lazy child, are you?”

My jaw tightens in the same way it always does when I’m trying to bite back a retort to his cruelness. Better not to provoke him. “What do you need?”

“I want you to come home,” he says, flat and absolute, as if it isn’t a request but a law. “There’s business I want to discuss with you in person. And something else. I’ll explain when you get here.”

Vaughn shakes his head at me from where he’s sitting now, sheets pooled around his waist, his face etched with disbelief. He mouths, *don’t.*

I take a breath. “I have exams,” I lie quickly. “Can it wait a bit?”

There’s silence. Then, sharp, like a whip: “Exams?” My father’s voice spikes. “Exams? You think you can defy me over something so trivial?”

“I just need a few days,” I try again, careful, placating.

His voice comes steady through the speaker, though I can tell he is struggling to hold back his rage. “God help me, Yulian, you had better be home tomorrow. If you’re not, I’ll come to the island myself. And

I'll drag you and your sister back personally."

My stomach drops. Shit. I can't ruin my sisters life because I can't stop being rebellious. She's so happy on the island, I can't ruin it for her.

"Uh-okay, I'll be there.

I don't want to think about the expression Vaughn is giving me. As soon as I agree to come, the line goes dead.

I lower the phone, staring at the black screen, bile rising in my throat.

When I finally look up, Vaughn's eyes are on me, hard, burning. "Tell me you only said yes to get him off the line."

I bristle. "Don't patronize me."

"Are you kidding?" Vaughn's laugh is sharp, bitter. "You're actually going back? After everything we just talked about?"

"You don't understand," I bite out, mocking his earlier words about Camilla before I can stop myself. "You can't understand. I have to. For my sister's sake."

His jaw clenches, shoulders rigid. "Then we'll send someone for her. I'll have her collected, safe, away from him."

"No." I shake my head fiercely. "It's not worth the risk. If something

happens-”

“Something *will* happen,” Vaughn snaps. “The risk is leaving her there at all.”

I drag my hands through my hair, climbing out of bed and pacing a step. “Maybe… maybe I can convince him. To accept us. To accept you. I should at least try.”

Vaughn’s expression darkens, his voice low and dangerous. “Are you- I think we’ve made it pretty fucking clear there is no chance in hell.”

“Just let me fucking try,” I growl, “just let me go home, and I’ll figure something out.”

“If you walk out that door, don’t come back.”

I stare at him. “What?”

“I won’t work with your father. I won’t even stand in the same room as him, unless it is to overthrow or kill him. He betrayed my family once, and I won’t let him close enough to do it again. You choose him, you lose me.”

“I’m not choosing him!” I shout, frustrated. My chest constricts painfully. I want to yell, to explain, to make him understand, but all that comes out is a sharp, defensive snap: “Just give me time to fucking think.”

The room vibrates with silence after my words. My breath comes heavy. His eyes don't leave mine.

I break away first, muttering, "I'm going to freshen up for the trip back to Chicago. Just give me a few minutes. Then we can talk."

He scoffs, bitter. "Talk about what? You've already decided."

I don't answer. I push into the bathroom, slam the door, grip the sink. Cold water splashes my face, drips down my neck. My reflection stares back at me, pale, drawn, my jaw tight, my eyes wild.

He doesn't know what it's like. Vaughn doesn't know what it's like to grow up with a father who is both God and executioner. Who can decide whether your life is worth anything with a single word. Who can drag your sister down with you if you dare disobey. Vaughn doesn't know what it's like to *need* his approval even when you hate him.

I breathe hard, gripping the porcelain, then straighten. I can explain. He'll understand if I explain. He has to. I listened, and I understood, didn't I?

I open the door. The room is dark, silent, still.

Empty.

The sheets are thrown back. Vaughn's things are gone.

My chest hollows out, a cavernous ache sucking everything inside me. I step forward like maybe I've made a mistake. But no.

He left.

Chapter End Notes

firstly, i hope you enjoyed.
secondly, i would like to apologise to those that keep up with my tumblr. im sure there are several asks sitting in my inbox. but i actually decide to delete tumblr last week. esentially, i was stressed out of my mind over the wifi thing, going back to school soon, my parents arent great, and knowing so many people were asking for the next update when i literally already had it written i just couldnt upload it without wifi. then i recieved an email with a comment on here which said something along the lines of they were giving up the fic cause i was taking too long. and honestly it was a bit too much and i needed a break, so i deleted tumblr and blocked ao3 from my email. i understand you want updates, and the comment wasnt even that bad, but was it necessary to say that? you dont know why i hadnt updated, and it hadnt even been two weeks. it was rude and uncalled for, and honestly upset me a lot when i was already down. if you have nothing nice to say, dont say it at all. i am sorry i just dipped without saying anything, but i was honeslty so stressed i cant even put into words. it wasnt permanent, i just needed to be able to write wihtout constantly getting notification like that, so ill probably redownload it again tomorrow. i am super sorry to everyone who is nothing but kind, and please remember i am a person with a life, not just a screen.
sorry if that came across as harsh. please just be kind and hopefully i will see you guys on tumblr again tomorrow :). it is lucsf19 :)
thank you for all the support as always <3

Chapter Thirty-One

Vaughn

-

Yulian went back to Chicago.

The thought hangs in me like a stone, heavy and immovable, dragging everything else down with it. I might have been the one who walked away from that hotel room, but he forced me when he said he would be going back.

And I've barely left my bed since.

It's worse now than it was before the hotel room. Before, when he was still back on the island, when I thought the worst thing I had to face was missing him. Back then, at least, there was the thread of possibility, the sliver of hope. Now, there's only the hollow space where he should be.

My parents don't seem to know what to do with me. Back then, they tried to distract me, to cheer me up, to drag me into family dinners and work I didn't have the energy for. Now, they just watch me. Constant worried glances. Whispered conversations in the kitchen. The air around the house feels like it's always holding its breath, waiting for me to say something I never do.

I spend most of my days in my room. Curtains closed, lights off, phone facedown. Sometimes I just stare at the ceiling for hours, letting the silence sink its claws in. Sometimes I sleep. Mostly, I just exist, which is exhausting enough.

It's late afternoon when the knock comes. Soft at first, then more insistent. I don't answer. Eventually the door creaks open anyway, and my mom steps inside.

She doesn't look surprised to find me still in bed. Just looks at me with worried, loving eyes, like it's physically hurting her to not know how to help her son. She just stands there for a moment, arms limply at her side taking me in like she's trying to figure out what to say, read what is wrong with me in the blank way I stare at the opposite wall.

"Your father is leaving for a business meeting in ten minutes," she says finally, her voice soft yet steady. "I thought maybe you'd like to join him. I know he would like it if you did, too."

"No, thank you." My voice cracks in the middle. I don't bother clearing it.

She nods, once, like she expected it. But she doesn't leave. Lingering at first, watching me, then crossing the room slowly, sitting down on the edge of my bed. The mattress dips, the weight of her unsettling the stillness.

"Vaughn," she sighs, and it's heavy with more than just breath. "You have to talk to us, sweetheart. You can't keep… whatever this is… locked inside. If it's about business, about the bratva, about anything-"

"It's not." My throat feels dry, every word scraped raw.

"Then what?" she presses, gentle but firm. "What's wrong?"

I roll onto my back, stare up at the ceiling. “Nothing you can fix.”

“You won’t know that for sure unless you let us try,” she says, a little sharper now. “You’re our son. Your father and I- we love you. But we can’t help if you don’t tell us what’s going on. Do you think we haven’t noticed? That we didn’t see it eating at you since the school year began? At first, I thought it was about Camilla. Losing her, the way it ended. But this…” She shakes her head. “This is more than that, isn’t it?”

I close my eyes. “Please. Just leave me alone.”

There’s silence. I hear her breathe out through her nose, slow and reluctant. Then the bed shifts as she stands. She leans down once, stroking a hand through my hair lovingly, and guilt overwhelms me at making her feel this way. Yet, I can’t bring myself to help either of us.

“All right,” she says softly. “But Vaughn, you can’t keep pushing us away forever. Whatever this is, we’ll face it together. Don’t forget that.”

She leaves, the door clicking shut behind her.

I roll onto my side, drag the blanket over my head, and let the darkness press in closer.

-

Yulian

-

I've been back in Chicago for a few days now.

The city feels the same, gray, sharp, unforgiving, but I don't. Even the idea of one day ruling it, having it entirely in the palm of my hand, isn't enough to cheer me up. Something in me is unsteady, like my bones no longer fit together the way they used to.

The first few days back, I drowned myself in the meetings my father lined up for me. I did it all, kept my expression locked in stone, my voice flat and obedient. It was easier than thinking. Easier than letting myself remember the hotel room, Vaughn's silence, the way it felt realising he dad walked away, when it felt like something had torn out of my chest.

The work is finished now, though. All the accounts settled, all the hands kissed with respect, all the duties checked off. My father seemed pleased enough with my efficiency. Yet there's still one thing left hanging between us, the thing he wouldn't tell me on the phone. The other reason he dragged me home in the first place.

And I haven't told him either. Not any of the things I told Vaughn I would discuss with him. That I'm gay, that Vaughn and I want to be together, and I'm willing to do whatever it takes to make that happen.

I've thought about it every night since I came back. Thought about standing in front of him, saying the words, letting him kill me if that's what it comes to. Vaughn was right, there's no world where my father would ever accept it. He'd tear me apart with his bare hands before he'd ever let his heir live openly like that. Maybe it would be easier just to say it and be done. End the pretending, end the waiting.

But I don't.

The summons comes in the evening, abrupt, like they always do. One of his men knocks on my door and tells me my father wants me in his office.

When I walk in, he's stood on his feet, leaning with his back against his desk. I just barely move in close enough for the door to shut behind me, standing in front of him as smoke curls through the air from the cigarette in his mouth. He doesn't speak at first, just studies me in a way that makes my skin crawl. That's his game, the performance of indifference until he wants to remind you he owns every breath in your body.

I clear my throat. "You said, on the phone, there was something important. Something you wouldn't tell me until I got here. Are you ready to discuss it now?"

His eyes lift. "Yes."

He doesn't beat around the bush.

"I want you to move back home," he says. "Immediately. There will be no more university, no more wasting time on that island. From this day forward, you will remain here, by my side, learning what it means to be Pakhan. You are my heir. It is time you began acting like one."

For a moment, I think I misheard him. The words land, but my mind rejects them. Move back home. No more university. No more island. No more Vaughn. Sure, it already seems like no more Vaughn has already happened, but now I can't even catch glimpses of him, not from an ocean away.

“No,” I say, too quickly, too sharp.

His head tilts, a flicker of irritation already sparking. “No?”

“I’m not leaving school. You told me I could finish my degree.” My voice rises, surprising me as much as it seems to surprise him. “I’ve done everything you’ve asked, handled everything you put in front of me. I’m not walking away from that now.”

His expression hardens, the air in the room tightening like a noose. “It is not a request, Yulian. You will stay here. Whether you like it or not.”

Something in me breaks loose. I push back harder than I ever have. “And what if I don’t? What if I refuse? You think you can just drag me back here and-”

His fist slams against the desk, rattling the crystal ashtray. “Enough!” His voice booms through the office. “You are my son. My blood. You will obey me. Do not mistake my patience for weakness. This conversation is finished.”

I stare at him, chest heaving. My heart is pounding so hard it hurts. Every instinct screams at me to keep fighting, to keep clawing for what I want, but it’s useless. He’s already decided. He’s always decided.

The fight drains out of me all at once. I slump forward, elbows on my knees, head hanging low. My father watches me like I’m nothing more than a piece on his chessboard. Which, I suppose, I am.

It's over. Without the island, there's no way to reach Vaughn. No way to see him, to hold onto the fragile, dangerous thing we almost built. Chicago is supposed to be my domain, my empire. It holds almost everything I have ever wanted, the life I deserve. Now, it has become a cage, and I've just been locked inside for good.

And I don't see a way out.

I sit there in silence, shoulders slumped, staring at the ashtray glinting on the desk. My father is already moving on, grabbing some papers from the desk behind him and flipping through them, like my defiance was nothing but smoke dissipating into the air.

And I realize, suddenly, that it will never change. He will always win. He will always own me. Unless I take the one thing left inside me, the one thing he can't control, and put it on the table.

I don't even feel fear anymore. Just a cold kind of clarity.

"I need to tell you something," I hear myself say. My voice is steady, too steady, like it doesn't belong to me.

His eyes snap up. "What?" The word is sharp, irritated, like I've interrupted him in the middle of something important.

And then I just blurt it. No planning, no rehearsing, no weighing consequences. "I'm gay."

For a moment, the room stills. The smoke hangs frozen in the air, the clock ticks on the wall, but nothing moves.

He doesn't breathe. His face goes blank, as if he didn't hear me right. Then, low, dangerous: "What?"

"I said-" I rush the words out before I can stop myself. "I'm gay. And I'm with Vaughn. I want to be with him. We've talked about it, about- about building something together. A deal between our bratva branches, a-"

The crack of his fist across my face cuts the words in half. My head snaps sideways, teeth biting into the inside of my cheek. For a second, the whole world sounds underwater, a dull roar filling my ears.

I taste blood.

I'm not surprised. Not even a little.

He's already crouched over me, where I fell to the floor, voice booming through the office like thunder. "What the fuck did you just say to me?"

I don't answer. My jaw throbs, vision doubling, but I don't move.

He doesn't wait for an answer anyway. His fist comes again, smashing into my temple, then another to my jaw. I scoot backward, hands coming up on instinct to shield my face.

"Are you out of your fucking mind?" he bellows, every word laced with venom. "You disgrace me! You shame this family! With him? With that bastard's son?"

Another blow drives into my ribs. The air rushes out of me, and I fold in on myself. He doesn't stop. He rains fists and fury down, each strike harder than the last.

I don't fight back. I don't even try. What's the point?

My arms cover my head, my ribs, but it doesn't matter. Pain crashes through me, bone and skin giving way. My body jerks with each impact, but inside, something is eerily still.

I knew this was coming. Maybe not tonight, maybe not this exact way, but it was always going to end like this.

He screams something else, insults, threats, I can't even hear them clearly anymore. The words blur, swallowed by the rush in my ears, like I'm under water again.

I'm not afraid.

Because even if I survived this, what would be left? A life without Vaughn. A cage I'd never escape. An heir molded into the image of a man I've always hated. I've wanted to be Pakhan my entire life, but not one like him.

Better to end it now.

My mind drifts. The blows keep coming, but they feel far away, muffled. My body is breaking, I know it, but I can't bring myself to care.

Instead, all I see is Vaughn.

The line of his jaw in the dim hotel light. The rough warmth of his voice when he whispered my name. The way he looked at me when we slept together, soft and slow, for the first time.

I hold onto that, clutch it like a talisman, even as my father's fists drive me deeper into darkness.

The world tilts, edges blur. Pain dissolves into nothing.

And the last thought I have before everything goes black is simple, clean, and final.

Vaughn.

-

Vaughn

-

Another couple of days pass, and nothing changes.

The curtains stay closed. The world stays grey. I stay here.

In my bed, in my head, under this suffocating blanket of emptiness. It feels like time doesn't move. I hear footsteps outside my door sometimes, voices muffled down the hall, the occasional knock I don't answer. But all of it feels distant, like I'm underwater again, trapped

where no one can reach me.

The door creaks open again, and this time I don't even bother pretending to be asleep. My father steps inside, his presence filling the room the way it always does, steady, heavy, impossible to ignore. He closes the door behind him and looks at me for a long time, standing there like he's trying to decide which version of himself to bring into this room: the Pakhan or my dad.

He chooses Dad.

"Your fellow Heathens say you're not replying to them," he says quietly, his voice more weary than stern. "They're worried about you. I'm worried about you."

Guilt twists in my stomach. I know I've been making them all worry, dragging them into this pit with me. "Sorry," I mumble, my voice hoarse from disuse. "I didn't mean to…" My throat closes around the words. I don't know how to say it. I don't mean to be this. A mess. A shadow of myself.

He moves closer, each step slow, deliberate. Then he sits down on the edge of my bed, the mattress dipping under his weight. The scent of his cologne drifts toward me, sharp, familiar and grounding. He's so close I can feel the warmth radiating off him.

"Don't apologize," he says firmly. "You don't owe me that."

I drag my eyes up to meet his, and the words spill out anyway. "I'm sorry for being like this. For not being strong like you. You're always in control, always… steady. I should be more like you, and instead I…" My voice cracks, shame rising hot in my throat. "…instead I'm like this."

For the first time in days, he smiles, small but real. “Do you want to know a secret, Vaughn?”

I blink at him. “A secret?”

He nods, leaning back slightly, resting his elbows on his knees like he’s settling into a story. “I was the exact same way you are right now. Once upon a time.”

I stare at him, uncomprehending. “You? Like this? Barely able to get out of bed?” The words feel foreign, wrong, attached to him. “No. You’re… you.”

He chuckles, low, with a teasing look on his face. “Not always. And I’ll tell you this, I wasn’t even your age. I was older. Much older. And it lasted months.” He pauses, letting that sink in. “So really, you’ve got nothing to apologize for. Nothing to worry about. At least you can say you’re a grumpy, hormonal teen. I was a grown man. And I fell apart.”

My chest tightens. I don’t know what shocks me more, that he’s admitting it, or that it happened at all. “…Why? What happened?”

His face shifts, shadows moving across his expression. He looks away for a moment, like he’s seeing another place, another time. “I lost your mother.”

The words hit me like ice water. I sit up straighter, confusion cutting through the fog in my head. “Lost her? What do you mean, lost her?”

His jaw clenches, but he keeps going. “Before you were born. It was… complicated. But, we weren’t together anymore. I had to be without

her. And for months, I thought it was permanent. That she was gone from me, forever."

I can't wrap my head around it. My parents are… perfect. Unshakable. I've grown up watching them, the kind of love that's so solid it feels like gravity itself. "You? And Mom? Separated?"

"Yes," he says simply, though his voice is rough at the edges. "And during those months…" He lets out a slow breath. "I was an utter wreck. Ask your uncle Viktor if you don't believe me. I could barely function. I'd just become Pakhan, worked my entire life for it, and what did I do once I got the seat? Nothing. Not a damn thing. I sat around, depressed, practically suicidal. Viktor carried me more than I'll ever admit to him."

I shake my head, disbelieving. "I can't imagine you like that. You're…" I search for the word. "…you."

He laughs again, softer and fonder than I usually see him. "That's how I am with her. That's how I'll always be with her. She is everything. Without her, I wasn't me. I wasn't the Pakhan. I wasn't even a man. Just a shell."

I swallow hard. My parents' love is legendary in my eyes. I've seen it in every look, every touch, every fight that always ends with them clinging to each other like the world could end tomorrow. Hearing it laid out like this, though, the raw edge of what it did to him to lose her, it rattles me.

"Was it really… that bad?" I whisper.

He meets my eyes, unwavering. "It was the only time in my life I've ever felt like that. And I know, no matter what else happens, no

betrayal, no war, no loss of power, nothing will ever feel like that again. Except losing her a second time. That would do it. Nothing else."

Silence stretches between us, heavy and suffocating. Because I know what he's saying.

He tilts his head slightly, studying me. "And now I look at you, Vaughn, and I see myself back then. I recognize that same emptiness."

My heart stutters, and for a second I can't breathe. I freeze, unable to move under the weight of his gaze. He knows. He knows without me saying it.

He leans in closer, voice low. "Have you found her? Your mother, to me. The person who does that to you."

Her, he says. Have I found *her*?

I don't answer. I can't. But the silence says everything.

His eyes soften. He already knows it means yes.

"Are they alive?" he asks carefully.

"Yes," I whisper, the word scraping out of me.

"Then why," he says, almost gently, "aren't you going to get them

right now?”

I laugh bitterly, a short sharp sound. “You wouldn’t be saying that if you knew who it was.”

“Then tell me who,” he presses, but there’s no anger, only patience.

I shake my head. “No.”

He exhales slowly, his jaw tightening just slightly, but he doesn’t push. Instead he says, “I hope you know that I would support you being with anyone. Anyone, Vaughn. I would take on the entire bratva for you, if that’s what it took.”

The words nearly undo me. My throat burns, my chest aches, and for the first time in days, I feel the sting of tears pressing against my eyes. I swallow them down. I can’t tell him. Not when it wouldn’t even matter anymore. He left.

So instead, I say, quietly, “I’m glad you got Mom back. I’m glad you didn’t lose her forever.”

His eyes flicker, a shadow of pain there.

“…But for me,” I add, my voice cracking, “that isn’t on the cards. I don’t get that ending.”

He studies me for a long time, his face unreadable. Then he sighs. Slowly, he leans forward, presses a kiss to my forehead, warm and steady. His hand lingers against my temple for a heartbeat longer, then he pulls away and stands.

“Get some rest, son,” he says softly, and then he leaves, closing the door behind him.

I’m left staring at the ceiling, his words echoing in my chest. He would take on the entire bratva for me. He lived through this once and came out the other side.

But me? I’m not sure I can.

Because unlike him, I don’t believe I’ll ever get Yulian back.

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Yulian

-

I wake to pain.

At first, I think I’m dead. My chest barely rises, breath shallow and sharp, and my head is pounding so hard I’m convinced it must’ve caved in. For a moment, I just stare at the ceiling. My bed. I’m lying on my bed. For a second, that makes no sense. The last thing I remember is the weight of fists, the taste of blood flooding my mouth, the world going black around me.

How am I here?

I shift, try to roll onto my side, and agony flares through me. A groan

rips out of me before I can stop it. My ribs scream, my stomach twists, and I can both feel and the bruises blooming, deep and ugly. I force my eyes down and catch the sight of my torso, splotches of purple, red, and blue, scattered like grotesque constellations. Even the simple rise and fall of my chest hurts.

I wouldn't be surprised if there are fractures, maybe worse.

The groan must've carried, because I hear footsteps in the hall, and my body goes rigid. My first thought is that he's coming back to finish what he started.

The door creaks open, and my father steps in.

To my surprise, he doesn't look angry, anymore, which is almost worse. Now I'm just on edge. His expression is composed and cold. He walks toward me and I freeze, my muscles screaming as I try not to flinch. My heartbeat is too fast, painful in my ribs.

"From this moment," he says, voice calm, deliberate, "Vaughn Morozov does not exist to you."

His words hit me harder than the blows he delt me that put me in this position. I blink, trying to process. He doesn't give me the time.

"You will train under me, as my heir, and you will never go back to that island." His eyes narrow, his lips pressed in a line that could be mistaken for calm if not for the steel underneath. "I'll speak with the men, make the arrangements. Once everything is in order, your sister will be brought back here as well."

Fuck.

My stomach sinks, and the pounding in my head intensifies. I picture her face when she finds out. She'll be dragged back into this world, cut off from whatever fragile freedom she's made for herself. She'll be cursed into misery for the rest of her life because of what I did.

Her heart will break, and I'll be the reason.

I want to scream at him, to tell him no, tell him I won't let him tear her life apart. But the words won't come. Not because I don't feel them, but because I know it would be utterly pointless. The thought twists my stomach into knots, shame burning as hot as the bruises on my skin.

His shadow falls over me as he steps closer. I hold my breath, frozen. His hand snaps forward, gripping my throat. I choke, clawing at his wrist, but his grip is iron. His eyes bore into mine, sharp and merciless.

"You'll be punished for what you've done," he says, low, controlled, his fingers squeezing tighter, cutting off what little air I can draw in. "But you're lucky, Yulian. I still need an heir."

His thumb digs into the side of my throat. My vision blurs, spots blooming at the edges. Just as I think he might really kill me this time, he lets go. I collapse back onto the bed, coughing, clutching at my throat as air scrapes painfully down into my lungs.

He doesn't wait for me to recover. He turns, his movements precise, dismissive. "Remember what I've told you," he says as he steps through the door. "Vaughn Morozov no longer exists."

I lie there, jaw clenched, chest aching with every shallow breath. My mind is chaos, Tati's face, Vaughn's name, the weight of my father's hand around my throat. I feel trapped between two cages: the one I hate, and the one I still want.

The worst part is, I don't even know which side of me is winning.

My throat still burns from his grip when I fumble for my phone. I need her to hear it from me first, not him. I need to tell her I never meant for this to happen.

It rings, and for a moment I pray she won't pick up. That I won't have to hear her voice, won't have to hear her break. But then there's a click, and her soft, anxious voice floods through the speaker.

"Yulian? Oh my god, are you okay? Did it work out? Are you and Vaughn-" her voice lifts, sounding hopeful, for good news, "-are you back together?"

My mouth opens, but nothing comes out, just my ragged breathing.

"Yulian?" Her voice sharpens, nervousness creeping in. "Are you okay?"

The word tears out of me before I can stop it. "No."

"No?" she repeats, startled.

"No," I whisper again. "Not okay. Not… any of it."

There's a pause. I hear her inhale sharply on the other end, a tremor in her breath. "What do you mean? Yulian, what- what happened?"

I press the heel of my hand against my eyes, trying to steady myself. But the truth tastes bitter on my tongue. "I'm back in Chicago," I say finally, voice hoarse. "With him."

The line goes silent for a second, then explodes.

"What?" Her voice cracks on the word. "You're- you're back there? With Papa? No, that's- that's not possible. You wouldn't- how? Why aren't you with Vaughn?"

The shame hits me harder than the bruises ever did. "I'm sorry." The words spill out like broken glass, sharp and useless. "I'm so fucking sorry, Tati."

"Sorry? Sorry for what?" She sounds frantic now, voice breaking.

I close my eyes, see his face again, the fury in his eyes when I said the words. "I told him," I say finally. My chest tightens, breath catching. "I told him I'm gay. That I want to be with Vaughn."

Her breath hitches like I've just struck her. "Why- why on earth would you do that?"

"Because I had nothing left to lose," I rasp, and my throat closes around it, threatening to choke me.

There's a sound on the other end, a muffled, choked sob. "Yules…"

She doesn't even finish the thought. Just my name, heavy with heartbreak.

"Did he hurt you?" she asks then, quietly, almost afraid of the answer.

I don't respond. I can't. The silence stretches between us, heavy and suffocating.

She knows. I hear her inhale, shaky and shallow. "Oh god. He did."

Her sob is sharper this time, strangled. "What's going to happen now?"

I press the phone tighter to my ear, wishing I could lie, wishing I could say something to soothe her. But I can't. "He said… he said I'll never see Vaughn again. I'm not going back to the island. I stay here now. I'm going to train under him, as his heir."

Her sharp intake of breath pierces me. She doesn't speak at first, and when she does, her voice is small. "What about me?"

The knife twists deeper. "Once he's spoken to the others… once everything's in order… he's sending for you. Permanently."

The silence that follows is suffocating. I can hear her breathing, shaky, uneven, like she's bracing for it.

“I knew,” she whispers finally. “I knew it was coming.” Her voice wavers, but she sucks in a breath, steadying herself. “Then no. I won’t wait. I’m coming now. I’m not leaving you alone there, not like this. I’ll look after you.”

The words should comfort me, but instead something inside me snaps. Panic, sharp and wild. I sit up too fast, pain tearing through me, but it doesn’t matter.

“No!” The shout rips from my throat, raw, desperate. “No, you are not coming back!”

She gasps on the other end. “Yulian-”

“You’re not listening,” I cut in, voice harsh, frantic. “You are not coming back here.”

“What’s the point in waiting?” she demands, tears in her voice. “It’s inevitable. At least if I come now, I can help you.”

“No.” My voice drops, steel cutting through the cracks. “You’re not coming back at all.”

There’s a pause, and confusion bleeds into her voice. “What… what do you mean?”

I grip the phone like it’s the only thing tethering me. “It’ll take him at least a week, maybe two before he makes it official and sets everything up, before he has you brought back. That’s all the time

you'll have." I swallow hard, every word like a blade in my throat. "In that time, I need you to run."

Her breath catches.

"Go to Annie," I push on. "Have her set you up with a new identity and then leave. Don't even tell me where. Just… go. As far as you can. Start over, travel, see the world. Do all the things you always dreamed about." My chest heaves, voice cracking. "Don't let him drag you back into this life. I won't condemn you to it. I won't."

"I can't-" she chokes, sobbing now. "I can't leave you."

"You have to." My voice breaks, but I force the words out, desperate. "I'd rather you be away from me and happy than here with me and miserable. You hear me? That's what I want for you. That's what I need."

She's crying hard now, I can hear it in the way she tries to speak but can't form the words.

Finally, she whispers, "Okay."

The word shatters something in me.

"I'll go to Annie," she says, trembling. "Right now. I'll… I'll do it."

Relief floods me, mingled with grief so sharp it's unbearable. I squeeze my eyes shut, press the phone tighter to my ear. "I love you, Tati, so

much. Remember that."

"I love you too," she whispers back, broken.

The line goes quiet after we hang up, but I keep the phone pressed to my ear like I can hold onto her a little longer.

-

Vaughn

-

I'm slumped on the couch, my knees drawn up, my arms draped over them with a thick hoodie on, despite the warmer weather out.

My mum insisted I come downstairs, said it wasn't good for me to rot away in my bedroom like some ghost. So I trudged down here, grumbling the entire way, and continued with my rotting.

Yulian's name echoes around my brain with every thought, all clawing back to him. Every time I try not to think it, it comes back louder, sharper, carving me open. He's everywhere, woven into every breath, every beat of my heart. And yet he's nowhere, not with me.

I hear heavy footsteps walking toward the room, and I glance up and see my father. His face is a wall, grim and closed off, and a something unpleasant settles in the pit of my stomach.

I straighten slightly, uneasy. “What is it?”

He doesn’t answer right away. He walks into the room, the weight of him filling the space, and sits in the armchair across from me. His eyes never leave mine. Something twists in my gut.

Finally, he speaks. “I received some photos.”

My pulse stutters. I force a frown, like I don’t know what he’s talking about, even as my body goes tense. “Photos?” I echo, slow. “What photos?”

His jaw tightens. He doesn’t elaborate. Instead, he reaches into his pocket, pulls out his phone. He holds it like it’s heavy, like it’s something he doesn’t want to be carrying.

“Of you,” he says flatly. His voice doesn’t rise, doesn’t break. It’s steady, controlled, but there’s something underneath, something dangerous. “With someone. I believe it’s the person who you have been so upset over, the one you wouldn’t tell me about.”

The world stops.

My blood goes cold. My chest locks up. Every nerve in my body screams, frozen solid in the exact position I’m in. I can’t breathe. Can’t move.

“What do you mean?” The words scrape out of me, shaky, unconvincing.

He doesn't bother answering. He just turns the phone toward me, thumb swiping the screen.

And there it is.

Me and Yulian. Against the cottage door, lips pressed together, my hands clutching at him like I'll never let go. His body angled toward mine, one hand cradling my jaw. The kiss raw and obvious, captured in perfect, merciless clarity.

The blood drains from my face. I feel it- feel myself go pale, hollow, emptied out. My ears ring.

He knows.

He knows.

My mouth is dry, my heart hammering, my body locked in place as though the moment itself is a trap and moving will set it off.

All I can do is stare at the screen. Stare at the truth presented clearly, right in front of my face, despite how hard we worked to keep it buried. Stare at the fact that it's no longer buried at all.

My father knows about me.

My father knows about him.

He knows about *us*.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Vaughn

-

I can feel the walls closing in before my dad even says another word.

He knows.

About me, about Yulian, about us. It is all completely out in the open, undeniable.

It's like all the air in the room is sucked away, and I'm left clawing for something solid to hold onto, but my fingers keep slipping. My lungs aren't working right, all my breaths are too shallow and too fast. I don't even realize I'm breathing like I'm drowning until my chest burns with the sharpness of it.

"No," I say quickly, too quickly. My voice cracks on the single syllable, and I swallow hard, shaking my head. "No, that's- those aren't- I don't even know what those are."

The lie tastes like acid, but it's all I have. The last thread of control I can try to stitch back together.

My dad doesn't raise his voice; he doesn't look the least bit angry. He just shakes his head slowly, eyes steady on me, calm in a way that makes me feel even worse. "Vaughn. It's okay. I know they're real."

The ground tilts under me. My stomach lurches. A sound escapes me, something between a laugh and a gasp, but it's ugly and brittle. "No," I repeat, but it comes out thinner this time, more desperate. My whole body feels like it's buzzing, a thousand tiny needles under my skin. "You don't- you don't know. You can't know. You weren't supposed to-"

My voice fractures, and I bite down hard, jaw locking so tight it aches.

He wasn't supposed to know. Not like this.

I was supposed to choose, to decide when, to decide how. It was supposed to be on my terms, in my timing.

My control.

But now the choice has been ripped out of my hands, torn away and shown to me in jagged pieces on the floor.

I feel sick. Like my skin doesn't fit right, like I need to claw my way out of it. My vision tunnels. I can't think straight, can't breathe. I pace, though I don't remember standing up, my hands in my hair, tugging hard like maybe pain will ground me.

"This isn't- fuck, this isn't-" My words splinter apart. My throat is raw, my breath catching like I've been running for miles when I haven't even moved an inch.

My dad says my name, sharp enough to cut through the static buzzing in my skull. "Vaughn."

But I can't look at him. If I look, I'll fall apart. My chest heaves and I feel my hands shaking as they clasp my head. I'm losing myself, spinning faster and faster in a spiral I can't stop. The photos, the kiss, Yulian's face, my dad knowing. Is it just my dad? Does anyone else know? Does *everyone* know? I can already hear it, the whispers, judgment, disgust, punishment. I can see everything unraveling, everything I am, everything I'm supposed to be, shredded before my eyes.

"I can't. I can't. I can't-" The words spill out like a mantra, frantic and breathless.

And then, suddenly, my father is in front of me. Close enough I have no choice but to look straight at him. His hands are firm on my shoulders, grounding me as his eyes bore into mine. "Vaughn. Look at me. Right here."

My gaze flicks up, trembling, caught, like he's yanked me out of freefall.

His voice is steady, low, deliberate. "You are my son. Nothing in this world changes that. Nothing. Not your sexuality, not who you date, not anyone else's opinion on it. Nothing."

Something inside me stutters, caught between disbelief and desperate hope.

He doesn't let go. His grip tightens, not painful, but strong enough that I can feel it down to my bones. "You hear me? I don't care if the whole fucking brotherhood stands against me. I will fight every last one of them for you if I have to. You are my blood, my heir, my *son* and nothing, *nothing*, will ever take that away."

My throat closes up. My chest convulses. The panic is still there, sharp and relentless, but it collides with his words, crashes against them like waves against a wall.

"I'm sorry," he adds then, quieter, but it hits me even harder. His jaw flexes, his eyes searching mine, unflinching. "I'm sorry if I ever made you think that loving a man could change how I see you. That it could take away what you mean to me."

The breath tears out of me. A sound, raw and broken, something I can't control. My whole body buckles, like the floor just gave way. My knees hit the edge of the couch, and I sink down hard, my hands shaking uncontrollably.

The spiral breaks apart, not because I pulled myself out of it, but because he tore me free of it. And now that it's gone, I'm left in pieces.

I fold forward, elbows on my knees, pressing my fists against my forehead like I can hold myself together. But I can't. I'm unraveling right there in front of him. My chest heaves in uneven sobs, the sound muffled, ugly, unrestrained.

And then his solid arms are around me, anchoring me to him. He pulls me against him like I'm a child again, like I'm not shaking and crying and falling apart in his arms. His hand is steady on the back of my head, his other arm braced firm around my shoulders, holding me like he won't ever let go.

By the time the storm inside me finally begins to ebb, I'm wrung out. My body aches and my throat is raw. But the panic has dulled, replaced by an exhausted heaviness that leaves me leaning against my father, clinging to the steadiness of his presence.

He doesn't move until I do. Only when I shift back, wiping at my face with the heel of my palm, does he give me space. His eyes stay on me though, steady and assessing.

"How long has this been going on?" he asks.

The question makes my stomach knot again, but not with panic this time, more like shame. Not because of Yulian, never because of him, but because I kept it from him. I let out a shaky breath, trying to find words, but they tangle in my throat. "It's… complicated."

One of his brows rises, his tone calm but firm. "Then make it uncomplicated."

I drag my hands through my hair, pulling at the roots until my scalp stings, trying to force the truth out. "Officially? A couple months. That's when we finally- when it became what it is. Was," I correct, my voice breaking. I pause and my chest tightens. "But things were happening before that. Probably since… since just after Camilla died."

My father's expression doesn't change.

I force myself to keep going, though my voice is hoarse. "But really… it started before all of that. From the moment we met as kids, we were meant to be. I know how that sounds, but… it's the truth. Like it was always going to happen, no matter how much we fought it."

He exhales slowly, nodding once, like he's taking it in, weighing it, storing it somewhere in that sharp mind of his. He doesn't push, doesn't pry. Just nods.

Then he asks, “do you know who took the photos?”

I shake my head quickly. “No. Only Yulian and I know where the cottage is. Maybe his sister too, but she wouldn’t do this. She wouldn’t betray him like that.” My stomach churns at the thought. “Someone followed us, or… or planted cameras. I don’t know.”

His jaw tightens, but he doesn’t say anything to that. Just keeps studying me.

“Is he why you’ve been so depressed lately?” he asks.

The words hit too close, and I can only whisper, “Yeah.” My voice cracks. “We’re… we’re not together anymore.”

“Why not?”

The silence that follows is deafening. My mouth opens, then shuts again, my throat closing on the words. How do I explain something that feels impossible to explain? That Yulian is both everything I want and everything I shouldn’t? That we keep tearing each other apart and crawling back, only to bleed all over each other again?

I can’t.

My dad seems to read it on my face, because he huffs softly through his nose, not unkind. “Let me guess. It’s complicated.”

I let out something that's almost a laugh, except it's too broken to be anything but bitter. "Yeah. Complicated."

Silence settles between us, thick but not hostile. Just… heavy.

After a long moment, I whisper, "I'm sorry."

His brow furrows. "For what?"

"For everything." My throat tightens as I list it out, one jagged piece after another. "For keeping him a secret. For being with the son of the man who hurt our family. For being so fucking-" I choke on the word, then force it out, "-fucked up over it instead of being strong, like you."

My father's gaze sharpens, but not in anger. More like in fierce disbelief. "There is nothing to be sorry for, Vaughn." His voice cuts through the haze, sharp and certain. "Do you hear me? Nothing."

I blink at him, stunned.

He leans forward, steady, unwavering. "I would never apologize for loving your mother. Never. And I don't expect you to apologize for loving Yulian."

The words land like a blow and a balm all at once. My chest aches, torn between relief and guilt so deep it threatens to drown me.

I swallow hard, shaking my head slightly. "But you still don't know everything."

His eyes narrow, focused, pinning me in place. “What don’t I know?”

The question slices through me, and my whole body goes tense. My mouth goes dry and I can’t look at him. I stare at the floor, at the wooden floor, anywhere but his eyes.

The guilt roars up, heavy and suffocating, pressing down on my chest until I can barely breathe. I want to tell him. I want to unburden myself, to lay it all out and finally stop carrying the weight alone. But the guilt is stronger.

“I-” My throat closes. The words won’t come. My heart races.

He waits, patient but sharp, eyes never leaving me. “What don’t I know, Vaughn?”

I shake my head, pressing my lips together so hard it hurts.

Eventually, he sighs and thankfully doesn’t push about what I won’t say. He studies me for a long, silent moment, and then, in a tone quieter than I expect, he shifts.

“What about the basement?” he asks.

The words snap through me like a whip. My breath catches, my stomach plunges. I stare at him, wide-eyed, frozen, because I wasn’t ready for that turn.

He keeps his gaze steady on me. “For all these years, I thought your aversion to Yulian was because he reminded you of what happened down there. But clearly, that isn’t the truth.” His voice doesn’t rise, but it cuts, precise. “So, what happened, Vaughn?”

My throat burns. I try to swallow, but it’s like gravel scraping down. I should stay silent. I should bury it, lock it down where it belongs. But the question rips something loose in me, something I’ve been aching to let out for years and years, desperately needing someone to understand what I went through, what it did to me.

Before I can stop myself, the words tumble out.

“He used to come down there,” I blurt. My voice is rough, unsteady. “When I was locked up. Yulian would sneak down to see me.”

My father’s expression flickers, surprise, confusion, something darker, but I can’t stop now.

“He… he didn’t treat me like an enemy. He would bring me food most nights, because they barely fed me during the day. He sat and talked to me for hours. Just… sat with me when it was all too much, the cold, the loneliness, the pain.” My voice cracks. “He reminded me I wasn’t completely alone. And we… we bonded. Closer than I ever thought possible.”

I can’t look at my father, so I fix my eyes on my hands, shaking as they twist in my lap. “It wasn’t just that either. It was everything. We grew close, closer than made sense. It was-” My chest heaves. “And then Camilla…”

I choke, the memory clawing up my throat like bile. “He killed her.”

That's the first moment I see my dad actually look truly shocked by what I'm telling him. His eyes go wide and he sits back a bit.

"He said it was because he was punishing her for hurting me. For cheating on me, betraying me. Even though he was the one she cheated with. I only recently found out. Like, really recently. It caused some problems between us for a while." My voice drops to a whisper. "Anyway, we danced around each other for so long after that, after she died. Always circling, never admitting what it was. Until finally… we stopped."

The words hang heavy, my chest heaving, and I glance up. My father still looks surprised, the lines around his mouth tighter, his brows drawn. But he doesn't look angry. Just stunned.

He leans forward slowly, eyes never leaving mine. "If you bonded so well back then," he says carefully, "then what happened in the years in between? You despised him, Vaughn. We all knew it. Where did that come from?"

I can't answer. My chest caves in, my breath comes too fast, too shallow. Panic grips me, searing through my veins.

My father notices instantly. His voice sharpens, but it's steady, grounding. "Vaughn. Look at me. Breathe."

I try, but the air catches in my throat, too jagged, too thick. My hands claw at my knees, nails digging in.

"It's okay," he says firmly. "You're safe. Nothing you say will stop me from loving you. Do you hear me? Nothing."

The words stab into me, anchoring me, and I suck in a ragged breath. Tears sting my eyes again, blurring my vision.

"I'm sorry," I gasp. The apology rips out of me, frantic, desperate. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry-"

"Stop." His voice cuts through, sharp but not cruel. He grips my shoulder, steadying me. "No apologies. Just the truth. That's all I want. Tell me the truth."

I shake, my whole-body trembling, but the pressure, the demand, the promise, it breaks me open.

"It was the escape," I whisper, barely audible.

He stills. "What escape?"

My breath shudders, my chest aching as I finally force the words out. And when I finally do, it just all comes tumbling out. How Yulian tried to help me escape, only to be stopped by the guards, how they dragged me back down to the basement, the beating I was delt as a consequence for it.

The memories tear through me, vivid and raw.

"His father-" My voice catches. His father, he… he told me Yulian was tricking me. That he'd only been pretending all along, that everything he said, everything he did, it was just to get information out of me. To make me believe I wasn't alone, just so I'd break faster. And I believed

him.” My voice cracks, splintering. “I believed him.”

The weight of it crushes me, the years of hatred, bitterness, rage, all born from that one poisoned lie. Because even though we have moved past it, talked it out, know that it was a lie, that he never betrayed me, it still cuts me deep to think how much time I missed out on with him because of it. All the things I did and said to him over it.

“For years, I thought Yulian betrayed me,” I rasp. “I thought everything we had, everything we shared, it was all a game to him. That I was nothing. That he was laughing at me behind my back. And I hated him. I hated him so much I thought it would kill me.”

My chest is still burning from everything I just spat out, but my father doesn’t look at me with disgust or rejection. His grip on my shoulder tightens, grounding me, his voice low and steady.

“You couldn’t have known,” he says. “You were a boy, Vaughn. You were manipulated, lied to, used. Don’t you dare put that weight on yourself.”

The words pierce me, make something shudder loose inside, but instead of relief, a sob claws up my throat. I shake my head, trembling harder, eyes stinging with tears that won’t stop.

“It isn’t the worst part,” I whisper. My voice cracks, broken and raw.

His eyes sharpen, narrowing with concern. “Then what is?”

The air feels heavy, impossible to breathe, but I force it out before I lose my nerve.

“The bombings,” I say, my voice shaking. “They were my fault.”

He goes still, like the world pauses with him. Slowly, cautiously, he asks, “What do you mean?”

And then it spills. The thing I have buried so deep it’s eaten me alive from the inside out.

“I… I gave him the addresses,” I choke out. My hands twist together, shaking so violently they barely feel like mine. “I wrote them down for him, Yulian. We had planned for him to run away and join me later, but he couldn’t straight away, because he couldn’t leave his sister. So I gave him all those addresses. I trusted him. I… I wanted him so badly, wanted to give him anything he asked for, and so I did. I handed them over. And then his father… his father took them, and the bombings happened, and it’s my fault. It’s all my fault. The deaths, the injuries, our men, our family, the people we loved, because I was too blind, too desperate,”

My voice breaks completely, dissolving into ragged sobs.

My father grips me tighter, dragging my gaze up to his. His voice is sharp but not unkind, every word deliberate.

“Listen to me, Vaughn. Focus.”

I try, my tears blurring everything, but his face anchors me, his voice cuts through the storm.

“What you just said,” he tells me, slow and fierce, “is not your fault. Do you understand me? Not. Your. Fault. You were a ten-year-old boy, Vaughn. Ten. You were manipulated by a man twice your size, with ten times your experience. He was manipulating a game neither of you

even knew you were playing. That blood is on his hands, not yours. Never yours."

The words should comfort me. Instead, they tear me apart, because I've carried this guilt so long it's become a part of me, and now, hearing him say it, I break. Completely.

"I'm sorry," I sob, my voice a mess of cracks and gasps. "I'm so sorry, Dad. For not telling you sooner, for hiding it, for carrying it like some secret shame, I should have told you, I should have-"

"Shh." He pulls me into him then, arms strong, steady, crushing me against his chest like I'm still small enough to fit there. "You have nothing to apologise for. Nothing. Do you hear me?"

My tears soak into his shirt, my body trembling so hard it feels like I'll shatter, but he just holds me tighter, like he can absorb it all. His hand moves to the back of my head, grounding, soothing.

"You've been carrying this alone all these years," he murmurs. "And it was never yours to carry. That's on me, for not seeing it. Not on you."

I cling to him, sobbing into his chest, every ounce of guilt and grief spilling out at once, and he just holds me.

After what feels like forever, when my sobs ease into shaky breaths, he pulls back enough to search my face. His eyes are softer now, though still heavy with things unsaid.

"Tell me something, Vaughn," he says quietly. "If you and Yulian had all that, if he meant so much to you, why aren't you together now?"

The question twists in me like a knife. I look away, throat tightening, voice raw when I manage to speak.

"Because he can't let go of his father," I whisper. "And I can't let go of what his father did. It would be a betrayal to you, to Mom, to our family, to everyone who died or suffered. I can't… I can't sit across from the man who destroyed us and pretend it's okay. I can't forgive him. And Yulian…" My voice shakes. "Yulian won't cut him off. He can't. Not even for me."

The silence stretches. My chest heaves, my guilt, my grief, my love all warring inside me, tearing me to pieces.

Finally, my father exhales, long and heavy. He cups the side of my face, his thumb brushing away a tear.

"It's okay to be selfish for the people you love," he says, steady, certain. "Do you understand? It is okay to not want to sacrifice one love for another. It does not make you evil that you don't want to give up the man you're in love with because of something his father did."

The words hit me so hard my throat closes. For the last few days, I've been tearing myself apart at the idea of choosing between Yulian and my family. But my father says it so simply, so clearly, like maybe it doesn't have to be a choice that destroys me.

I crumble again, quieter this time, leaning into his touch, letting the tears fall. "I don't know how to live with it," I whisper. "With wanting him and hating so much that comes with him."

I slump forward, elbows on my knees, palms pressed hard into my

eyes like if I just squeeze enough maybe I can make this all vanish. My father has been sitting opposite me, silent for a long stretch, letting me breathe in and out, shaky and uneven, but at least not spiralling anymore.

Then, casually, I hear from the doorway to the room, “did we ever tell you about when your uncle Anton tried to kill your dad?”

My head swivels toward my mom, where she stands with a gentle smile and her arms crossed. My dad’s head lazily turns to her, too, though he probably already knew she was there. He claims he can always ‘sense her presence’. I used to think it was stupid until I met Yulian, and my whole-body tingles when he gets close to me.

The words are so out of place, so offbeat, that I don’t even acknowledge at first that my mom might have heard our entire conversation. “What?” My voice is loud, full with disbelief. I stare at her like I’ve misheard, but while she grins at me, her face isn’t joking or teasing.

I turn my attention back to my dad, and he doesn’t look the slightest bit confused by her declaration. Rather, he looks amused by it. He leans back in his chair, holding his arms out in a gesture to my mother, who comes toward us and sits beside him, immediately finding herself with my dad’s arm wrapped around her.

“It is true,” my dad confirms. “He spied on me for years. Plotted against me, and I had no clue. We didn’t even know he was your mother’s brother at the time.

My mouth gapes. I can only blink at him. “You’re- no. What? Are you serious right now?”

My mom nods once. “We are.”

It knocks the air right out of me. It’s quite a whiplash going from crying over Yulian to finding out my uncle is apparently a former traitor. “And you’re telling me this now? Just like that?” I look between them for an answer.

My father’s mouth lifts at one corner, clearly finding amusement in my confusion and bafflement. “We never told you because it didn’t matter. Not anymore. Your mother made sure of that.”

“Made sure of what?”

“That he didn’t kill my brother, obviously,” my mum says with a grin, knocking a shoulder against my dad.

“That no matter how much I may have hated him, no matter how badly I may have wanted revenge, I loved her more.” My dad adds, his eyes finding mine, steady and unflinching. “That’s the only reason I let him live. Because she asked me to stand down. Because she was more important to me than my vengeance.”

“*And*, because he and Anton had worked together for years and were friends, so your dad didn’t *want* to kill him,” my mother adds sternly, giving my dad a look.

He says nothing in response, but I know that means it is the truth.

I sit back, stunned. The living room feels too small for this, the air too thick. I mutter, “I don’t- I don’t understand why you’re telling me this now.”

“You don’t?” My dad tilts his head, patient. “Think about it, Vaughn. You’ve been tearing yourself apart believing that even entertaining the idea working with his father, is some unforgivable betrayal. That being with him would dishonor your family, would dishonor me. But you haven’t stopped to actually ask us what we think. You’ve decided for us. Written your own verdict and condemned yourself to live under it.”

The words cut deep because they’re true. I feel it in the marrow of my bones. My jaw tightens, shame pressing against my chest.

“So what, you’re saying it *wouldn’t* be betrayal?” I throw the words out bitterly, like a challenge, because I can’t imagine him meaning anything else. “You’re saying I should just, what, work with Yulian’s father anyway, after everything he’s done to us? Just so I can be with Yulian?”

“We are saying…” my mum jumps in, choosing her words carefully, “we want you to be happy. No matter what it takes.”

I look away for a moment. “I guess that means you heard everything, then?”

My mum leans forward and takes my hands in hers. “Yes, I did. And I’m so proud of you, baby. I love you so much, and I can’t wait to meet my future son-in-law officially.”

My eyes bug a bit at ‘future son-in-law'.

“And prepare him for one hell of a shovel talk.”

“Mum!”

“Don’t speak to your mother like that. She is right,” my dad says, and I don’t know which parent I should warn Yulian more about.

I sigh, telling myself I’m thinking too far ahead.

“So your saying you want me to be happy,” the room tilts a little, like gravity’s shifted. My throat is dry. “Even if it means forgiving *him*? Even if it means putting the man who-” my voice catches, “-who *bombed us* within reach again?”

His gaze doesn’t waver. “Vaughn, I once chose to let it go of my vengeance because loving your mother mattered more to me. If you decide that loving Yulian is worth more to you than the hatred you carry for his father, then that’s your choice. And I will stand by you in it. You don’t have to force yourself to choose us when it would make you unhappy.”

I can’t breathe. I shake my head, half in disbelief, half in desperation. “But it’s not the same. It’s not. Uncle didn’t blow up our men, didn’t-”

“No,” he cuts me off firmly, “it’s not the same. But the principle is. You’re holding yourself hostage to a level of loyalty that none of us ever asked of you. You think you’re protecting us, but all you’re doing is punishing yourself.”

The words land heavy, heavier than anything he’s said yet, because I know, I *know*, he’s right. My whole chest aches with it, sharp and raw. I rake a hand through my hair, gripping hard, like if I pull enough maybe I can hold myself together.

“I don’t know if I can do that,” I admit finally, voice breaking, quieter than a whisper. “I don’t know if I can just let go. Pretend it’s not betrayal.”

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees, eyes never leaving mine. “I’m not asking you to pretend. I’m asking you to decide what matters more. Your hatred… or your happiness.”

I swallow hard, but it sticks, a lump that won’t go down. All I can manage is, “I don’t know.”

“That’s fine,” he says softly. “You don’t have to know right now. Just don’t chain yourself to misery out of some sense of duty to me, or to your mother, or to anyone else. Because we would never ask that of you.”

His voice gentles, but his eyes stay fierce, unwavering. “Do you understand me, Vaughn? Never.”

Something in me crumbles at that. For years, I’ve been carrying this story in my head, that loving Yulian was selfish, that it spit in the face of every scar carved into my family. And here’s my father, telling me he doesn’t want my sacrifice. That he’d rather see me happy than see me miserable for him.

My hands tremble in my lap. I feel like I’m both lighter and heavier at the same time, like I’ve been given permission to breathe but also shown the weight of everything I’ve kept locked up.

“I don’t deserve that,” I whisper, though I’m not even sure if I mean it for him or for me.

“You do,” he says without hesitation. “You always have.”

I lean back, and allow my head to clear for a moment, digesting everything.

“Thank you,” I say quietly, rough around the edges, like it’s been scraped out of me. My throat feels raw. “For saying all that. For… for making it clear that I’m not a traitor for just wanting to be happy.” I rub my palms against my knees, restless, unable to sit still. “But it’s pointless.”

His brow furrows, but he doesn’t interrupt, just lets me keep unraveling.

“Even if I could-” my voice shakes, I clench my fists to steady it, “even if I could accept working with Yulian’s father, even if I could stomach that, it doesn’t matter. He’d never allow it. He’d never accept me and Yulian together. He wouldn’t work with us. He wouldn’t even tolerate us.”

The words tear out of me sharper than I meant them to. Anger and despair mixed in one. I look away, jaw clenched so tightly it hurts.

“And that’s not even…” My voice falters. I press my knuckles against my lips for a second before forcing myself to finish. “Even if I could forgive him for what he did to *us*, I don’t think I could stop myself from killing him for what he’s done to Yulian.”

That lands heavy in the room. For a moment, all I can hear is the ticking of the clock on the mantel.

I swallow, force the words out, almost a whisper. “His whole body… Dad, his whole body is covered in scars. Every inch of him. All from his father.”

I look at my dad then, and his expression is steady. He doesn’t look surprised, and that somehow hurts worse, like maybe he already suspected.

“You see?” I say, bitter, self-mocking. “You’re telling me to choose happiness over hatred, but I can’t. Not with that. Not when every time I look at him, I see what his father did. And every time I think about his father breathing the same air as us, I want to end him for it.”

My dad lets out a long breath, leaning back, his gaze heavy on me. “Sometimes,” he says slowly, “it can be hard to truly let go of the person who hurt you. No matter how bad they were, no matter how deep the scars run.”

I stare at him, waiting for the rest.

“Because, deep down,” he continues, “you’ll always want them to be the person you wished they were to you. The parent you needed. The protector you deserved. That craving doesn’t vanish just because they failed you, or hurt you. You keep hoping. Hoping they’ll change. Hoping they’ll finally give you the love you’ve been waiting for. And that hope can be harder to kill than any man.”

His words make something twist in my chest, sharp and aching, because I see it. Yulian always being half-chained to his father no matter how much he hates him. The fact that despite his hatred for him, he never once fights back against his cruelty. That look in his eyes when he talks about him, when he can’t quite let go.

I cover my face with my hands, dragging them down over my mouth. “So what am I supposed to do, then? Tell me what I’m supposed to do, because I don’t know anymore. I don’t know how to fix this. I don’t know how to make it work.”

He leans forward now, resting his elbows on his knees, and the intensity of his gaze pins me in place. “Do you truly want to be with him?”

It is an easy question.

“Not just in theory, not just in your head. Do you *want* to fight for him? Do you want to be with him, no matter what it takes? Look me in the eye, Vaughn, and tell me.”

I meet his eyes, and the truth is already there, burning so hot it hurts to hold in. My chest cracks open. “I’m in love with him,” I say, and it is so, *so* easy to admit. “I’m in love with him, and I want to be with him more than anything else in this world. More than I want to breathe. More than I want… anything.” My hands fist against my thighs, nails biting into my skin. “I just want him, I want to be Pakhan, I want this life and I want him by my side as I do it.”

My father doesn’t move for a beat, letting the weight of my words hang between us. Then he nods once, slowly, like a man passing judgment. His eyes soften.

“Then go get him,” he says.

He says it like it is so simple. With so much steadiness, so much certainty.

And so I do.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Yulian

-

My body still feels like it's made of glass, every movement pulling at bruises or stabbing through deeper aches I don't want to acknowledge. I'm stretched out on my bed, half-propped against pillows, staring at the ceiling and listening to the silence of the house. My father won't be back until late evening as he is in meetings with the other bosses having discussions about my return.

I close my eyes, breathing slow. The skin on my ribs still burns where his boot caught me, and my jaw is tender from his fist. He said he still needs an heir. That's the only reason I'm breathing. If not for that, maybe I'd already be in the ground.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand. For a second, I think it's Tati, checking in again, but when I reach for it and see the name, *Vaughn*, I nearly drop the damn thing. My heart seizes, then kicks into a sprint.

The message is short. Just a location. A few minutes away by car.

And: *Come.*

I blink at it, disbelief crashing through me, then type back before my mind catches up.

What are you doing?

The reply comes instantly. *Waiting.*

That's all.

Shock and adrenaline surge together, dragging me upright. Every bruise protests, but I don't care. I yank on a clean shirt, dark jacket, shoes, moving like a man possessed. I don't even stop to think.

By the time I limp out to the garage, the guards glance up at me. I toss a casual look over my shoulder. "I'll be back shortly."

They don't question it. They don't dare. One of them opens the door for me, and I slide into the driver's seat, heart hammering, trying not to picture Vaughn waiting for me. Trying not to imagine that maybe this is another trick, another way the universe can gut me.

The drive is short. My hands grip the wheel tight, knuckles white, every turn bringing me closer to something I can't fully believe is real.

When I pull up at the spot, an old, cracked parking lot beside an abandoned warehouse, I see him. Hoodie pulled up, head down, obviously trying not to be noticed. But I'd know him anywhere. My chest feels like it might split apart.

I get out of the car, ignoring the stiffness in my legs, and move toward him.

He turns at the sound, and when his eyes find mine, his face *lights up*. Pure, unfiltered and raw.

But then, in a heartbeat, as his eyes lock onto me, it changes. His face falls. The light dies. His whole expression drops into something grave, even furious.

My step falters. Confusion jolts through me. “Vaughn?”

He storms toward me, closing the distance fast, and before I can think, his hands are gripping my face. His palms are rough, fingers digging into my bruised jaw, tilting me up into his glare. His eyes are wild, full of something sharp enough to cut me open.

“Who the fuck did this to you?” he snaps, voice low and shaking with fury.

It takes me a beat to register that he means the bruises.

And all of a sudden, I’m utterly delighted.

Because Vaughn, despite us being on the outs, despite whatever the fuck our relationship has become, is still furious because someone hurt me. Vaughn has his hands trembling on my face, eyes burning with protectiveness, anger, and worry.

I can’t stop the smile that curves my lips, bruised though they are.

“Aw,” I drawl, voice rough but smug, “look at you, worried about me. I love how protective you are. It’s hot as hell.”

His grip tightens, and his face darkens further. “Was it him?” His voice is sharp enough to cut steel. “Was it your father? Tell me right now.”

I chuckle, leaning into his touch like a lunatic. “I didn’t know you had such a protective streak, Mishka. Seeing you riled up like this has me all hot and bothered.

I’m not sure where the confident streak has come from. Why after weeks of being in a bad place, I’m suddenly feeling like I was again before all this. Maybe it’s because he is actually here, with me, right now. I didn’t have to ask or plead. I didn’t show him my injuries first; I didn’t change my mind about my dad. He just came to me. Completely of his own free will.

“Answer me,” he snarls.

I just grin, even as my jaw throbs beneath his fingers. Because God, I’ve missed him like this. Fire in his veins, intensity in his stare.

But I can’t let myself drown in it. Not yet. I swallow, shift my weight, and murmur, “There’s something I want to tell you.”

In my head, the words line up, desperate and aching. *That I should never have let you think I’d choose him over you. That I never would. That I’m sorry. That I love you.*

But before I can let them out, he cuts me off.

“I need to say something first.” His voice is urgent, fierce, and I fall silent instantly.

“Vaughn-”

“Let me.” His eyes bore into mine. “Please.”

I nod once.

He breathes hard, then the words spill out of him, raw and relentless.

“I’m sorry. For everything. For being so focused on my own family, my own pain, my own way of doing things. I never stopped to think about you. About what you’ve had to live with, the things you carry from *your* family.” His throat works, his hands tightening on me like he’s terrified I’ll disappear. “I’ve hated your father for a long, long time, and I always will. But if putting up with him, working alongside him, gritting my teeth through it all, that’s what it takes to be with you? Then I’ll do it. I’ll do anything.”

He keeps going, more apologies, more fire, but I don’t let him finish.

I grab his hoodie, yank him down, and crush my mouth to his.

The kiss is messy, desperate, bruising against bruises, but I don’t care. His taste floods me, his heat, his fury. My whole-body sparks alive for the first time in days.

He jerks back, breathless, eyes wide. “What was that for?”

I smirk, lips swollen. “Because I’m in love with you, Vaughn.”

He freezes. Just for a moment.

And then, in a voice low and sure, a smile spreading across his face, he says, “I’m in love with you too.”

The words detonate inside me, leaving nothing but fire. I crash our mouths together again, hungrier this time. His hands slide to my waist, pulling me closer, and I fist my hands in his hoodie like I’ll never let go.

It gets heated fast, tongues, teeth, heat curling low in my gut. The world blurs until it’s just him, just us. I murmur between kisses, “What about your parents-”

“They know,” he cuts me off, breath ragged.

I jerk back slightly, stunned. “They what?”

His lips brush mine again. “Someone took pictures. Of us. At the cottage. Sent them to my parents.”

My blood runs cold. “What? Who-”

He grabs my face, making me look him the eyes. “It’s fine,” he says, pulling me back into another kiss. “We will figure it out later, and sort it. But my parents are accepting. So for now, just let me show you how much I’m yours and you’re mine.”

Questions swarm in my head, panic flaring, but his mouth is back on mine and I can't think straight. I don't want to.

He pushes me back until I hit the wall of the warehouse, hard. A groan slips out, not entirely pleasure, and my body flinches.

Immediately, he pulls away, eyes scanning me, horrified. "Shit. Did I hurt you?"

I laugh breathlessly, clutching at his hoodie to keep him close. "I'm covered in bruises, remember? It's fine. I like a bit of pain with my pleasure."

His face hardens. "Not if the pain wasn't inflicted by me."

The words strike something deep in me, dark and wild.

I observe him for a moment, thinking if I want him bad enough. I decide I absolutely do, and lean close, lips brushing his ear. "Then come back to mine. My dad's not home, and I can sneak you past the guards. My bed's big enough. You can do whatever you want to me."

His breath shudders against my neck. "Zmejka, I don't know…"

"Please say yes," I whisper, voice dripping with need.

He pulls back just enough to meet my eyes, and what I see there

makes my knees weak, love, desire, fury, all tangled together.

“Yes,” he says, rough and certain.

And my heart, bruised and battered as it is, soars.

-

The iron gates part for me with their usual mechanical groan, and I drive through, pulse quickening at thought of what we are doing. Vaughn is in the backseat, lying low like a fugitive sneaking into enemy territory, which, in a way, he still is, and if anyone saw him, if anyone reported him-

I shove the thought away.

The garage door closes behind us with a dull echo, sealing us in. For a moment, we both stay still, as if waiting for the whole place to explode. Then I exhale, grinning, and look back at him.
“All clear, baby,” I murmur.

He sits up, tugging his hood back, eyes darting around. Not nervous exactly, Vaughn doesn’t really do nervous, but watchful. I climb out first, and when he joins me, his hand finds mine without hesitation. It’s strange, the weight of it. Despite going without it for years, I find that it can ground me like nothing else can.

We slip inside, quiet and practiced. A few guards linger around at their posts, but not many, thankfully. I know their rotations, their blind spots, as well as I did back then. I guide Vaughn through, and together we move noiselessly along the walls.

Then, halfway down a corridor, something in him changes. His fingers go rigid in mine, and when I tug, expecting him to follow, he doesn't. He stays rooted, shoulders tight.

"What?" I whisper, glancing back.

But his eyes aren't on me. They're fixed, wide and unblinking, on the hallway to our right.

I follow his gaze.

And I understand.

At the end of that hallway waits the basement door. Thick steel, unremarkable to anyone else in this house, but to Vaughn? That's the place where he was dragged, locked, beaten. Where everything in him changed and led to him being right back in this spot again.

Almost nine years later, and the sight alone has him frozen.

Something ugly coils in my chest, fury, guilt, the urge to burn this entire mansion down brick by brick until the memory of it is nothing but ash. But all I do is move closer, slide my hand from his and instead wrap my arms around him. He resists at first, still caught in whatever he's seeing, but then he lets me turn him, step by step, until the basement door is out of sight.

I stop in a shadowed corner, press him gently against the wall, and hold his face in my hands.
"Hey," I murmur. "Look at me. Not there. Me."

His gaze shifts, reluctantly, but when it meets mine, it anchors. His chest rises and falls too fast, his jaw clenched, but he nods once.

"You never have to be down there again," I tell him, and for once, I don't lace it with sarcasm or edge. Just the truth. "Not ever. Do you hear me?"

Another nod, this time harder. "Yeah," he says, voice rough. Then again, firmer, "yeah. Let's just… let's just go to your room."

I don't argue. I lace our fingers again and lead him the rest of the way, taking turns and stairs until finally, the familiar weight of my bedroom door closes behind us.

For a moment, he just stands there, taking it in. My room isn't like the rest of the mansion. It's spacious, yes, but stripped bare in many places. No art, no trophies, no warmth. Just me.

His eyes catch on the massive glass enclosure that takes up half of one wall.

"Is that where Slinky lived?" he asks softly.

I blink, surprised. "You remember his name?"

He glances at me like I'm an idiot. "Of course I do."

A laugh escapes me, sharper than I intend. "Yeah. That's where he lived. I guess even though I never got another, I couldn't bring myself

to get rid of his home.”

Vaughn doesn’t answer. He just crosses the room, slow and deliberate, until he’s standing over me where I’ve sat down on the bed. Then he leans down, and his mouth brushes mine. Gentle, careful, like I’m something fragile.

It drives me insane.

I kiss him back, harder, sliding my arms around his neck. The world shrinks to the heat of his body, the weight of his hands, the press of his lips. It starts slow, but heat always builds between us like dry tinder catching flame. His breath quickens, mine too, and before long he’s pressing me back against the mattress, climbing over me.

And then pain spikes sharp along my ribs when his knee brushes the bruises. I hiss, jerking slightly.

Immediately, he pulls back, eyes dark with worry. “Shit, sorry. I’ll be gentle.”

I grin, because the way he says it makes me ache for him more. “Gentle doesn’t sound very fun.”

“I mean it, Yulian.” His voice is steady, firm. “I won’t hurt you more than you already are.”

I cock a brow, feigning innocence. “You don’t even have lube.”

He smirks, sliding a hand to his pocket and pulling out a small tube. “You think I came unprepared?”

A bark of laughter escapes me. “That’s very assuming of you.”

“I know you,” he counters smoothly, leaning closer until his breath ghosts my lips. “You can’t resist me.”

And he’s right.

Our mouths crash together again, hungrier this time, the kiss turning into something wild, desperate, inevitable. My fingers clutch at his shirt, pulling him down harder, and when his hands roam my sides, I arch into the touch despite the soreness. Every scrape of teeth, every press of tongue, it pulls me deeper under, until all I can think is *him, him, him*.

The mansion could collapse around us, my father could storm in with a gun to both our heads, and I still wouldn’t let go.

Because Vaughn is mine.

And I am his.

-

I stir awake to warmth pressed against me, and then I feel the steady rise and fall of Vaughn’s chest against my back, his arm draped around my waist, his breath brushing the back of my neck. My body

relaxes instantly, as if my bones remember him even before my mind does.

I shift slightly, enough to glance over my shoulder. His eyes flicker open, hazy with sleep, and the corner of his mouth curves up when he sees me watching him.

“Hi,” he murmurs, voice rough. Judging by the light coming through the window, it has probably only been an hour or so.

His voice makes something in me ache.

I turn fully to face him, close enough that our noses nearly touch. His smile lingers, mine mirrors it, and then we’re kissing, slow at first, the kind of kiss that’s more about relief than hunger. But it doesn’t stay that way. His hand slides up my side, my fingers tangle in his hair, and heat sparks between us like always. Within moments, the world narrows to nothing but the taste of him, the way his body presses against mine.

The door opens.

I freeze. Vaughn stills, too, but it’s too late.

My father stands in the doorway.

My heart lurches into my throat. He was supposed to be gone for hours still, at meetings with the higher-ups, far from here. But no, he’s here, now, his shadow filling my room. His gaze sweeps over the bed, over me, over Vaughn, Vaughn naked beside me.

The silence stretches like a wire ready to snap. I wait for the explosion, for the shouting, the orders, the violence. But none of it comes.

Instead, he says calmly, “Hello, Vaughn.”

Vaughn doesn’t reply. His jaw tightens, his eyes flick to me instead.

I gape at my father, throat dry, words stuck somewhere between horror and disbelief. Why isn’t he furious? Why isn’t he calling guards, pulling guns? What the hell is happening?

“Wipe those looks off your faces,” my father says flatly, stepping further into the room. “Get dressed, Yulian, and meet me in my office. Vaughn can wait here.”

That’s it. No threat, no rage, no orders to tear Vaughn apart in front of me. Just an instruction, delivered like it’s nothing out of the ordinary.

Then he turns and leaves, shutting the door behind him.

For a long second, I just sit there, staring at the closed door, my mind blank.

“What the fuck,” I breathe.

Vaughn is already pushing up, swinging his legs off the bed. “Don’t

go.” His voice is sharp, urgent. “Yulian, don’t. It’s a trap.”

“It’s always a trap with him,” I mutter, dragging a hand down my face. My body feels sluggish, caught between the remnants of warmth from Vaughn and the cold shock of my father’s presence.

Vaughn moves in front of me, gripping my shoulders, making me look at him. “Then don’t walk into it.”

I shake my head, standing to pull on my pants. “If I don’t, it’ll be worse. You know it.”

He glares at me, jaw clenched, but doesn’t argue- yet. I start tugging on my shirt, movements jerky, still trying to wrap my mind around the fact that my father walked in on this, on us, and didn’t go ballistic.

“This isn’t right,” Vaughn says finally, low and dark. “He’s planning something.”

“Of course he is,” I snap, then soften when I see the look on his face. He’s not angry at me. He’s afraid for me. “Vaughn… if I don’t go, if I make a scene, he’ll have the guards swarming in here in seconds. They’re his, not mine. You know that.”

He exhales through his nose, sharp and frustrated. His hand rakes through his hair before he grabs me again, this time pulling me close enough that our foreheads touch. “Then I’m coming with you.”

I almost laugh, but it comes out bitter. “Yeah, that’s a brilliant idea. March into his office together, hand in hand? He’ll have you dragged out, immediately, if not worse.”

“I don’t care,” Vaughn says, deadly serious.

I grip his wrists, holding them where they clutch me. “I do. Don’t make this worse. Don’t give him a reason.”

His eyes search mine, stormy and furious and aching all at once. Finally, slowly, he nods. “Fine. But listen to me. I’m not just sitting here, twiddling my thumbs while he does whatever the hell he wants to you. If I think something’s wrong, if I hear so much as a raised voice, I’m coming. You hear me?”

I nod once, because there’s no point trying to argue him down.

He cups my face, pulls me into a kiss that’s all fire and defiance, a claim and a promise in one. When he pulls back, his voice is rough. “Shout if you need me. I’ll come running.”

A smirk tugs at my lips despite everything. “You always do.”

Then I force myself to turn, to walk to the door. My hand lingers on the handle for half a second longer than it should, before I push it open.

The hall beyond feels colder than usual, emptier. Every step toward my father’s office echoes too loud in my ears.

And all I can think, as I steel myself for whatever’s waiting, is that Vaughn is right behind me. Not here, not literally, but if I need him, he’ll come.

He always will.

-

I push the office door open and step inside, every sense on edge. The room is dim, lit only by the desk lamp and the dying light through the wide window. My father is already there, seated casually behind his desk like a king on his throne, his fingers tapping idly against the polished wood.

He doesn't even glance up at me when he says, "Sit."

I do as I'm told, lowering myself into the chair opposite him, spine rigid. The silence stretches out like a wire pulled tight. I force myself to meet his gaze, to keep my face unreadable. "What do you want?" My voice is sharper than it should be, but I can't help it. My nerves are on fire, my stomach twisted into knots.

Finally, he leans back in his chair, steepling his fingers beneath his chin. "I had some important discussions today. With the other bosses." His tone is almost conversational, too calm for the storm that usually follows when he says something like that.

I narrow my eyes. "And?"

"And," he continues smoothly, "I had to inform them of certain… developments. Regarding you and Vaughn."

For a second, I'm sure I misheard him. My whole body goes rigid.

“You what?”

His eyes flicker with something, amusement, maybe, or just the faintest glint of cruelty. “I told them about your relationship with him.”

I stare at him, stunned. I didn’t think he would ever breathe a word of it. Not to them. Not to anyone. He thrives on control, on appearances, on shame as a weapon. He should have wanted to bury this secret, not parade it in front of the other bosses.

“Why?” I demand.

“Because it was necessary,” he says, as though it’s obvious. He tilts his head, eyes gleaming in the lamplight. “And because, as it turns out, it was for the best.”

The unease in my gut deepens. My voice comes out tight. “For the best how?”

He smiles faintly, that cold, razor-thin smile that’s never reached his eyes. “We’ve come up with a plan. You and I, working together. You’ll get what you want, being with Vaughn, working with his family’s branch in New York. It will all be allowed.”

My suspicion sharpens to steel. Nothing is ever that simple with him. “Allowed,” I echo, flat.

He nods. “Yes. Because in secret, we’ll be working against them. Reporting back everything they do, every weakness, every vulnerability. Feeding it all to me and the others, so we can dismantle

them from the inside. And when the time is right, we'll take them down completely."

For a moment, I'm sure my brain malfunctions. Did he really just-

I lean forward, staring at him like he's lost his mind. "You want me to be with Vaughn, while betraying him." The words taste like poison in my mouth. "You want me to use him, to use *us* like- like a weapon."

"Yes," my father says without hesitation, and his calmness is infuriating. "That is exactly what I want."

I can't even summon words at first. My mouth opens, then closes again. The idea of it, pretending, faking, poisoning everything Vaughn and I are, it's so grotesque I almost laugh. But there's nothing funny about this.

"No," I say finally, low and cold. "I would never do that to him. Not for you. Not for anyone."

His expression doesn't flicker. He only sighs, like I'm being a stubborn child. "I thought you might say that."

Then he swivels the laptop on his desk around, the screen facing me, and my stomach sinks.

He clicks play.

The video begins instantly, and for half a second I don't process what I'm seeing, then my chest caves in.

It's me and Vaughn, at the cottage. Recorded through the window, grainy but unmistakably us. Vaughn on his back, his head tilted back in ecstasy, his mouth open on a moan that sends a spear of horror through me. Me between his legs, moving into him, holding his hips. His hands clawing at my shoulders.

The sound fills the office, our gasps and groans too intimate, too raw, echoing in a place where they don't belong.

I freeze, my entire body going ice-cold.

"How the fuck did you get this?" My voice cracks halfway through, fury and panic bleeding through.

He doesn't answer, though, he doesn't need to. His smirk tells me enough.

I shove the chair back with a screech against the floor. "It was you," I spit. My hands are shaking. "You sent those pictures of us to Vaughn's father, didn't you?"

His eyes glitter with satisfaction. "Yes."

The confirmation knocks the air out of me. I almost collapse back into the chair.

"I hoped it would motivate his father to cut you off from Vaughn's life completely. To punish him the way I punished you." His words are smooth, clinical, as if he's discussing business, not the destruction of

my life. “But clearly, given that Vaughn is here in this house, it didn’t work as I planned. No matter. It was, in the end, for the best. Now, the plan we discussed can move forward instead.”

I shake my head violently, horror boiling into rage. “No. I told you, I won’t do it. I would never betray him like that.”

Not again.

“Yulian,” he says softly, with mock patience, “if you don’t, I’ll release this video. To all the members of both organizations. Imagine it, our strong, powerful ally Vaughn, their golden heir, seen like this. On his back, moaning like a slut. Do you think they’ll ever respect him again?”

My stomach turns to stone.

He leans forward now, voice lowering to something almost conspiratorial. “And this is just one. I have others. Plenty of others, in fact, some of them even with him on his knees. Think of what that will do to his reputation. To yours. Think of how easily the respect he’s built could crumble.”

I can’t breathe. My throat closes, my pulse deafening in my ears.

He tilts his head. “So, will you be cooperative now?”

I stare at the screen still glowing between us, Vaughn’s face caught in a moment of bliss that should have been private, sacred, *ours*. And now it’s been twisted into a weapon.

My mind scrambles for options.

I know him. I know how much that armour matters, how much being respected matters to him. If those videos were released, it wouldn't just wound him. It would break him.

And I would rather die than let that happen. Not to mention, the idea of anyone else seeing Vaughn in that position, hearing those sounds, makes me utterly murderous.

I swallow hard, my throat burning, my chest constricting. The only thought cutting through the chaos is simple: I would do anything, *anything*, to protect him.

Even this.

I force myself to look my father in the eye. My voice is steady, though it feels like it's tearing me apart from the inside out. There is only one option.

"I'll do it," I say. "I'll go through with your plan."

His smile spreads slowly, smug and triumphant. "Good."

Chapter Thirty-Four

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yulian

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The car slows to a stop in front of Vaughn's family home, and the reality of what I'm about to do starts to sink in.

Vaughn notices, of course. He leans over, smirking in that infuriatingly perceptive way he does.
"You're nervous."

I scoff, though the sound feels weak. "I'm not."

"You are." He says it like he's announcing a fact no one could possibly argue. "Big bad Yulian Dimitriev, nervous. Don't tell me it's because you're about to meet the great Pakhan, Kirill Morozov."

I glance at him, narrowing my eyes. "No."

"No?" His grin widens, teasing. "You're telling me you're not scared of seeing if he's as terrifying as everyone says?"

I exhale, rolling my shoulders as though that might steady me. "No. I'm nervous about meeting my boyfriend's parents."

Vaughn freezes for a fraction of a second, just long enough that I catch it. A faint flush creeps up his neck before he scoffs, rolling his eyes, though his lips twitch like he's fighting a smile.

"You're ridiculous," he mutters.

"And you're blushing," I shoot back, savouring it. Because I love the feeling of getting under his skin.

He mutters something I don't catch, grabs my hand, and pulls me out of the car. The Spring air warm and together, we walk toward the front doors. I don't even know why my heart is pounding. It doesn't matter what his parents say, Vaughn and I are stuck together now, and nothing they can say will change that.

Nevertheless, I know how much Vaughn's parents' approval will mean to him.

Inside, the house is warmer than expected. Not in terms of temperature, but in terms of how homely it feels. Vaughn pulls me through the decorated hallways, saying hello to a few of the staff as he goes. He doesn't let go of my hand once.

We stop at the threshold to the living room. Vaughn stands there first, and his parents, who are seated together on one of the sofas, stop mid-conversation upon seeing him. His mother's face softens while his father's sharpens.

"Did everything go okay?" His mother asks, her tone layered with both concern and steel.

Vaughn nods once. "Yeah. Everything's fine."

Only then do I step into the room. I square my shoulders, force the practiced calm back onto my face, and say, “Hi. I’m Yulian, Vaughn’s boyfriend. It’s good to meet you.”

Both of them rise at once. Sasha doesn’t waste a second, she crosses the space with a speed that surprises me and extends her hand. Her grip is firm, strong enough that I know she could crush bones if she wanted to.

“Call me Sasha,” she says, voice brisk but not unkind.

“Yes, ma’am,” I reply automatically.

Her eyes flicker, amusement glinting there, before she finally lets go. Then Vaughn’s father steps forward.

“Sir,” I state confidently, and extend my hand.

His grip is even tighter than his wife’s. It is both a test and a warning. I don’t flinch, don’t pull away until he does. His eyes flicker between me and Vaughn, weighing something, measuring. It feels less like an introduction and more like being put under a microscope.

Finally, he says, “I look forward to seeing you prove yourself worthy of my son.”

The words hit me like a blade. I inhale, steady, and meet his gaze without wavering. “I’ll spend the rest of my life doing that, if that’s what it takes. But at this point… no matter how unworthy I may be, it wouldn’t change anything.”

“And why is that?” he asks, almost lazily.

“Because I’m in love with him.”

Beside me, Vaughn exhales sharply. I glance just long enough to see him smiling, small, genuine, the sort of smile that makes me want to fight the whole damn world just to keep it on his face.

Kirill’s expression doesn’t change, though there’s a flicker, something unreadable, in his eyes. He and his wife exchange a look, seemingly having a conversation entirely through their minds.

Then, he turns back to me. “I suppose that explains why you slept with and killed Camilla.”

The words drop like a stone. My stomach twists, my jaw locking before I can stop it. Vaughn snaps his head toward his father, scowling.

“*Dad-*”

Kirill doesn’t look at him. His gaze stays pinned on me, like he’s testing to see if I’ll break.

Vaughn cuts in again, sharper this time. “That’s enough.”

Finally, Kirill leans back slightly, as though nothing’s happened. “There are some things I’d like to discuss with you one-on-one later,”

he says smoothly.

My mind flashes through a dozen possibilities, none of them good. Still, I incline my head. “Of course.”

But before anything else can be said, Vaughn steps forward. He straightens, his voice cutting through the heavy air.

“Actually, there’s something we need to discuss with you too.”

And just like that, the tension twists again, shifted, redirected, but still sharp enough to draw blood.

“I want you to help me kill my father.”

The words leave my mouth, and the room seems to tilt on its axis. Sasha blinks, while Kirill’s eyes narrow. Vaughn’s hand squeezes mine in support, and I find the pressure a support to keep talking.

“My father-” I start, and the sentence is a knife I have to drag across my ribs. “Is attempting to blackmail me.”

I see Vaughn avoid eye contact with his parents.

“He’s made me an offer,” I say. “He told me I could go to New York, live there, work with you, but only if I agreed to feed him information, to play double agent for him, to undermine the New York branch from the inside.” I taste bile when I say the words out loud. “Of course I told him I wouldn’t, but then he showed me the blackmail material. He says if I don’t comply with him, then he will release it,

and destroy our reputations. Hearing about two Mafia heirs together is one thing but seeing it may still be too much for our world."

There's a long silence, full of the weight of what I've just admitted. Sasha's fingers drum on her knee, and I can see she's thinking about what I just said. Kirill is already shifting from assessment to strategy. Vaughn doesn't let go of my hand; his thumb rubs the back of my knuckles in a way that says he's listening, he's with me, he's not going anywhere.

"My father wants me to betray you," I finish, voice small now. "He wants me to ruin everything we have and hand it to him so he can use it. I can't let that happen. I won't."

It was an easy decision, in the end. As soon as I realised, I was cornered, in that office, I knew what I had to do. I had already fucked up once by refusing to take out my father the first time with Vaughn in that hotel room, and I wasn't going to make the same mistake again.

Seeing him to easily threaten Vaughn's life was what pushed me over the edge. Before, it was myself I thought about and was why I struggled with myself so deeply. But in the end, the moment he brought up Vaughn, everything became so clear.

There was only one option left. I need to be with Vaughn, no matter what. And the only way to do that is to get rid of my father. Permanently.

I only agreed to his plan in the office so I could safely get the two of us out of there. As soon as we were on the plan to New York, where my father believes I am starting my infiltration, I explained everything to Vaughn. He couldn't even force himself to look sad on my behalf when I said we were going to kill my father, but I suppose I can't

blame him, especially after how pale he turned at the mention of the videos.

I watch the way Kirill's eyes flick to Vaughn and then back to me, and suddenly the atmosphere in the room is less like an interrogation and more like a war council. He straightens, the chair creaking under him.

Kirill nods once. "And what exactly does he have on you?" he asks, eyes narrowing, shrewd as a blade. "You say that while people may be okay knowing you're together, seeing it is another story. But photographs are one thing, it cannot be those, they are too simple. We need to know the full extent of what we are working with, especially so we can work on destroying it completely too. We need to know his leverage."

I look at Vaughn; in the flash of panic on his features I see the truth mirrored. He looks away, and for a heartbeat the world tilts again.

"He has at least one tape," Vaughn says finally, voice tight. "A sex tape taken through the cottage window. There may be more. He claims there are more." His eyes are bright and furious. "We thought nobody else knew the cottage's location. We were so sure-"

Sasha's hand moves to her mouth. Kirill's expression is flat but harder now; he's already moving past shock into damage control. "We'll deal with the tape," he says quietly. "The priority is to find out who filmed from the outside and how they found you in the first place. Presumably, they were working for your father, Yulian, but who?"

"A cottage?" Sasha repeats, and there's pity there, soft and dangerous. "A place you thought was safe."

"We thought so," Vaughn says. He's tight with anger and something

else I can't name; guilt perhaps. He holds my gaze like an apology.

I feel my chest tighten until it hurts. "It doesn't matter how. It matters that my father has it. He can release it at any time. He promised he would. He promised to ruin him."

Kirill listens, eyes sharp, analytical. He nods slowly, not saying anything for a moment that would give away what he's thinking. Then he finally speaks. "Very well. Then we have two problems. First, we need to figure out who took all of these photos and videos. And second, we need to erase them, permanently. No copies, no leaks, nothing."

We both nod.

Kirill stands then, stretching lightly, as if he's been planning this next step all along. "For now, I'll be contacting the other members of our organization. Taking down another mafia branch isn't something you do easily. It's going to take planning, strategy, manpower, and patience."

I feel the thrill of chaos coil tight inside me. Even though it is my own empire we are talking about, the idea that it will be wholly and completely *mine* by the end of this…

Sasha leans forward slightly, her hand brushing Vaughn's lightly, and her eyes meet mine.

"I'll do whatever it takes," I say, voice low, but steady. "Whatever it takes to make this right, to protect Vaughn, and to finally end what my father has been trying to control."

Vaughn squeezes my hand under the table, and I glance at him His look is full of that same fire I saw on the plane, the same unwavering loyalty, the same quiet madness that matches my own in a terrifyingly perfect way.

I smile. Sharp, slightly manic, but full of intent. “We’re going to do this together. All of us. And nothing, *nothing*, is going to stop us.”

Kirill gives a small nod, approving, calculating. “Then we begin.”

Kirill and Sasha move to another room, the soft click of the door echoing down the hallway. I can hear the faint hum of his voice over the line as he starts calling members of the New York Branch. The Volkov’s, Sokolov’s and Orlov’s, most likely.

With his family on board, Kirill coordinating, and me feeding them information, we can map out how to infiltrate and destroy my father. Every route, every contingency, every pawn on the board. It’s almost… satisfying. A plan forming from chaos. I feel the familiar thrill curling inside me. But that’s not all there is. Because before we even touch that, there’s the other problem. The videos.

I glance at Vaughn. He’s pacing lightly, jaw tight, eyes narrowed. His hands twist as if they’re the problem, twisting, squeezing, turning. I know that look. He’s spinning through every possibility, every angle, every mistake we could have made. I take a step toward him, hand brushing against his arm. “We need to figure the tape thing out.”

He exhales sharply, rubbing a hand over his face. “Yeah. Even just taking down your father might not completely prevent them from being released.”

I nod. Every instinct in me buzzing, chaotic, dangerous. “We never

told anyone. Not a soul. No one knew the cottage existed besides us. It is obviously someone working for my father, but who?"

Vaughn freezes mid-step, eyes flicking to me. "How long do you think he has known?"

I shrug, but my chest tightens. "He always seems to know everything. Doesn't matter how far away he is, doesn't matter how careful I think I am. He always finds a way. That's why he's dangerous. That's why he's my father."

Vaughn steps closer, hand brushing mine again. His touch is grounding, soft, human. "So… we start by figuring out who did it and how to erase it. That's the priority?"

I nod, grin twitching at the edge of my mouth. Sharp, a little manic. "Exactly. If those videos are gone, permanently, before we even make a move, it's like erasing their leverage before the game even starts. And if we figure out who took them… well, that's an added bonus. The person who dared, someone working for my father, no doubt, they're going to regret it. Deeply."

Vaughn rolls his eyes, but there's a faint smirk playing at the corners of his lips. I catch it. He's amused, but underneath, I know he's calculating the same things I am. That's what I love about him. He matches me. Step for step, thought for thought, chaos for chaos.

We sit on the sofa, spreading papers across the coffee table, sketching ideas, scribbling names, tracing possible ways the cottage could have been discovered. My fingers tap against my leg, jittering, restless.

Vaughn shakes his head. "I don't know. I've double-checked everything we did. I've looked at every person. We didn't tell anyone."

A pause. Heavy. Neither of us wants to admit the truth out loud: that my father's reach extends far beyond what we see, that any slip could unravel everything. But I don't flinch. I thrive in the chaos. I feed off it. And Vaughn… Vaughn's quiet determination gives me fire.

Just then, the door opens. Kirill steps in, expression measured, authority radiating off him in waves. He's silent for a moment, letting us breathe the tension, letting us feel the weight of the plan we're part of. Then he speaks, calm and precise.

"I've spoken to the other bosses," he says, voice low but carrying. "They're meeting at headquarters to discuss our approach, to strategize the infiltration."

My pulse hammers. This is it. The gears are turning, the plan moving into motion. I feel alive, sharp and dangerous.

"For now," Kirill continues, "I want you two to focus on the videos. Finding them and erasing them. And figuring out who took them so we can deal with them accordingly."

Vaughn nods, his jaw tight. "Understood. We'll work on it."

Kirill's eyes narrow, and his gaze lands squarely on me. "And Yulian… before I leave, I'd like a word with you. Alone."

I raise an eyebrow, a flicker of my manic grin tugging at my lips. "Of course. Anything you need."

He nods, satisfied, and steps back toward the door, his presence retreating, but leaving the tension in the air thicker than ever. Vaughn leans back, running a hand through his hair. I watch him, heart picking up speed, mind already leaping ahead, thinking, planning,

turning over possibilities like a blade in my hand.

“Yulian,” Vaughn murmurs, voice low, almost hesitant, “we have to figure this out. The videos. Before anything else.”

I nod, sliding closer to him. “I know. And we will. We’ll find them, erase them, and whoever dared to cross us… well, they’ll wish they hadn’t. I promise you, Vaughn, no one will hurt you. Not while I’m alive. Not while we’re standing here.”

He smiles faintly, tense but trusting. “You know… I wouldn’t be the only screwed by that video.”

“I know,” I reply, “but I’ve always cared more about you than about myself.”

“Funny,” he says, “I think the same thing.

That’s enough to fuel me. Enough to sharpen every thought, every move, every plan. Chaos is coming, destruction is coming, and my father, my pathetic, controlling, omnipresent father, is about to realize exactly how unstoppable I can be when I’m not just fighting for myself. I’m fighting for him, too.

-

The door shuts behind us with a heavy click, like the lid of a coffin sealing me inside. Kirill’s office smells like old money, authority, and leather.

He looks at me as he gestures toward the chair opposite him. Just a flick of his hand, the kind of motion that makes men twice my age jump to obey. For a second I think about staying on my feet, just to be difficult. But then I picture Vaughn's face if I come out of here with a black eye and no permission slip signed by Daddy. So, I sit.

The chair groans under me, stiff leather, no comfort in it. Figures. I wonder if it is on purpose, to make people uneasy when they sit across from him, and I think about using the tactic myself one day.

Kirill sits back in the chair opposite, and we just sit there in silence long enough for me to start cataloguing the objects on his desk. His laptop. Two glasses. Some papers that are covered up. I wonder if I'll be allowed access to those soon. A bottle of very expensive vodka. A pen that could probably double as a weapon. I wonder if he ever had to use it. I wonder if he'd use it on me.

He reaches for the bottle and pours vodka into both glasses. He doesn't bother asking if I would like one, just finishes pouring and then slides the glass straight over to me. I grab it and pull it close.

"You like Vodka?" He asks

"Yes."

"Good."

I pick it up, cold in my hand. I consider not taking a sip to keep my head clear, but I don't want to be rude.

"What do you want?" I ask.

“What? I can’t have a little chat with my future son-in-law?”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I say nothing.

He swirls his glass like he’s holding the whole weight of our conversation in there, waiting for me to drown in it. Then he says, casual as a man asking the time, “What are you willing to do for my son?”

I don’t think. The answer claws out of me like it’s been waiting its whole life to get free. “Anything.”

His eyebrows twitch, just barely. I really hope that means approval, because I honestly think I’m at the point where if he did forbid Vaughn and I being together for any reason, I would just grab Vaughn and run.

“Anything is a big word,” he says. “Are you willing to kill your own father for him? Some of your own men?” His eyes snap to mine, cold and clear. “Because saying it is different than living it. And from what I hear, from Vaughn, you weren’t so ready a few days ago.”

My throat tightens, not with fear but with annoyance. Being questioned on my loyalty to Vaughn frustrates me, but I know that it is a fair assessment.

I squeeze the glass in my hand, watch the condensation smear under my fingers.

“It isn’t easy,” I say, forcing my voice steady. “To let go of someone who’s hurt you. Because some part of you is always hoping… that maybe there will be a day they won’t.”

It comes out softer than I mean it to. But it’s true.

Kirill looks at me with an odd expression I can’t decipher, though I wouldn’t describe it as bad. It confuses me a little.

“I understand that more than you think,” he says. “If all of us turned out like our fathers, then I would be just like yours.”

That stops me cold.

I stare at him, trying to reconcile the image in my head. It is hard to imagine Kirill as ever even being a child in the first place. He appears like he was born with an old soul. To grow into the man he is today, and have raised someone as amazing as Vaughn despite having a father like mine… well, it almost gives me hope for myself.

“I didn’t know,” I say, because what the hell else do you say to that?

He shrugs, drinks again.

I sit back, sip my own vodka, and I wonder if Vaughn knows about his father.

“I’ll admit something too,” I say after a moment. “I thought you’d be more hostile toward me. Considering your history with my family.

And… considering I'm with your son."

He laughs under his breath, low and short. "I did have my doubts." His gaze sharpens, pins me like a knife. "Not about Vaughn being with a man. Never that. But you? Yes."

I grin despite myself, even though I probably shouldn't. I quite like the idea that I've gained a reputation, even to Vaughns father. He has probably heard all the stories about my chaos, the grenade Vaughn insists on holding even though the pin's halfway out.

"But then," Kirill continues, "I saw the way you look at him. And the way he looks at you. Any man who can make my son smile the way you do… is a man I wouldn't mind calling son-in-law one day."

The words slam into me. For a second, my brain short-circuits. Did he just say-?

I almost laugh, because he actually sounds serious. And the image of sitting around a table with Vaughn and his family, passing the potatoes, playing games, handing over Christmas presents, seems utterly ridiculous. And yet the moment it pops into my brain, I want it more than anything.

And hearing Kirill call me son-in-law, in a tone that seems like he is being genuine, makes me think it could actually happen.

Kirill lets the silence stretch, then leans forward, voice harder now. "But I want to be clear. If you ever harm him, mentally, physically, emotionally, in any way, nothing in this world will save you from me."

There it is. The threat that I had walked in here expecting. And I definitely don't think he is bluffing.

I nod. My throat is dry, but my words come steady. "The day I hurt Vaughn again, in any way… I would hope you do."

And I mean it. I've hurt Vaughn before. I'll spend my whole life making up for it. If I slip, if I become my father, if I tear into Vaughn the way I was torn into, I'd rather Kirill put me down like a rabid dog.

Our eyes lock, the air between us taut as wire. I extend a hand across the desk, and hold my breath. Truthfully, I don't care massively about his approval. It won't change anything, it won't change how I feel about Vaughn, it won't stop me spending the rest of my life with him. But I know how much his approval means to Vaughn, and so it means at least a little something to me.

My hand hovers in the air for a few seconds, and for a moment, I don't think he will take it. But then he lifts his own and firmly shakes my hand. I let out a sigh of relief.

His hand is strong and unyielding, and even if I would never admit it to him, I'm happy to know that he will be the closest thing to a role model when I kill my father and become Pakhan. He is the sort of leader I would want to be. Nothing like my father.

I rise from the chair. My legs feel steady, though my head is a storm. I give him a nod as I go, and he returns it.

As I return to the living room to the door, I wonder if he believes me. If even with my words, he fully understands just how deeply my feelings for Vaughn go. The things I would do for him. My obsession runs so deep that I don't think there are words in existence that could

encapsulate it.

But then I consider how Vaughn talks about his parents relationship, and how Kirill looks at Sasha, and I think he might have a clue.

I leave the office with the taste of vodka on my tongue, the echo of Kirill's warning in my ears, and the strange, dangerous warmth of something that feels almost like acceptance burning under my skin.

-

Vaughn

-

The door opens and I'm on my feet before I realize I've moved. Yulian steps out of my father's office, sharp-eyed, alive, carrying something in his expression I can't quite read. I don't wait. My hands catch his jacket, and I pull him down into a kiss.

It's quick and sweet, more instinct than thought, like I need to prove to myself he's still here. His mouth curves against mine, the smirk already forming.

I pull back just enough to breathe. "Well? Did he too mean for you?" I ask teasingly.

His laugh is low, pleased. "No. He was… honest. Direct. But not mean."

Relief spreads through me, though part of me had braced for the

opposite. My father can be merciless, and Yulian has a talent for pushing. And to think of two of my favourite people getting along… well, it makes everything else going on right now a little more bearable. Before I can speak again, Yulian tilts his head, voice dropping softer.

“I’m happy to know your parents look out for you so much.”

The words sink into me like stones. My chest twists, because he means it, and because I know what he doesn’t have. What he hasn’t experienced since his mother passed. I get to live with a father who guards me like a hawk, a mother who does the same, a family that, despite the chaos, loves me. And Yulian… his father would rather see him destroyed.

“Yulian…” I start, guilt heavy on my tongue.

He shakes his head before I can continue, brushing his hand against mine like he’s sealing the conversation shut. “It’s okay. Really. Come on.”

He pulls me toward the sofa, tugging me down with him. He has a way of filling a space until resistance feels pointless.

We sit, shoulder to shoulder. For a few seconds I just let myself breathe him in. Then I speak, because the thought has been coiled in me for days.

“Everyone’s going to know soon,” I say.

“Yes,” he replies, no hesitation, as though he’s been waiting for me to

say it out loud.

I glance at him, searching. “Are you ready for that?”

He smirks, turning his head just enough to catch my gaze. “I should be the one asking you that. Me? I’ve been ready to tell the world that you’re mine for almost a decade.”

Something sharp fills my chest at being called his. He always does this, throws a line so outrageous, so sincere, it knocks the breath from me. A smile tugs at my lips despite myself. I lean over, press a kiss to his cheek.

“I thought I’d be more on edge,” I admit. “But I’m not. I just… I feel excited. At the idea of being with you whenever I want. Wherever we are.”

His grin sharpens, dangerous and gleeful. “I can’t wait to see the look on the heathens’ faces when they find out.”

I groan, tilting my head back against the sofa. “You have to at least try to get along with them.”

He raises his eyebrows, all innocence. “Why wouldn’t we?”

“*Yulian.* If not because they’re my family, then because you’re about to be pakhan. It’s your duty to maintain good relations.”

He sighs dramatically, rolling his eyes. “Fine. I suppose we’ll continue

living on the same island for the next few years, so I'll try."

I laugh despite myself, shaking my head. "So generous."

He nudges my knee with his own, smirking. "You owe me for the sacrifice."

"What do you want in return?" I ask, wary.

He leans closer, voice dropping low. "You. Every damn day. That's enough."

"Good. Because I plan on you being mine forever."

Yulian grins and kisses me.

We fall into easy rhythm again. We talk about the future, the small things, the impossible things. Him dragging me halfway across the world just because he feels like it, me insisting he has responsibilities, him promising to cause "only minimal chaos" at family dinners. He brushes his hand over mine, absent but possessive, and each touch tightens something in my chest.

And then his mouth is on my neck.

I stiffen at the sudden contact, then melt, because it's him, and because it feels good in a way that short-circuits reason. His lips drag slow and deliberate over my skin, leaving heat in their wake.

“Yulian,” I murmur, tilting my head despite myself, “we can’t. Not here.”

“Why not?” His voice is muffled against my neck, teasing.

“Because this is the living room,” I say, catching his shoulder. “Anyone could walk in.”

He pulls back just enough to look at me, mischief glinting in his eyes. “You’re right. I don’t want anyone else seeing you like that. So, we should just go up to your room instead.”

I roll my eyes, trying not to smile. “No. We have other things to do.”

“Like what?” He’s pouting now, though his hand is still on my thigh, tracing lazy circles.

“Like figure out who took those photos and videos,” I remind him.

He sighs like a man carrying the weight of the world. “Fine.”

I press a kiss to his temple, amused despite everything. “Good.”

We lapse into silence for a moment. I let my head fall back, eyes closing, letting the weight of the sofa and his presence sink into me. He’s reckless, dangerous, infuriating, and I want him everywhere, all the time. The thought of finally being able to stop hiding, of no more

stolen moments in shadows, feels like oxygen flooding into lungs I didn't realize were empty.

But under the excitement, guilt lingers. The way he said it earlier, about my parents looking out for me, it sticks. The only people he has ever had like that are Tati and Mikhail, who he has arguably been protecting back, too. He had to fight every inch of his way here.

As if sensing my thoughts, he nudges me with his shoulder. "Stop overthinking."

I glance at him, startled. "I wasn't."

He smirks knowingly. "You always are."

I want to argue, but instead I sigh, leaning into him. "Maybe I was."

His hand slides into mine, fingers lacing, his thumb stroking across my skin. "It doesn't matter. I don't need what you have. I just need you."

The words settle deep, heavy and warm, like an anchor in my chest.

Before I can reply, I realize I need to do something. "I should talk to my dad," I say, pulling myself upright.

Yulian tilts his head, amused. "Already got his approval. What more do you need?"

I shake my head. “Just something I need to say. I’ll be right back.”

He leans back against the sofa, stretching out like he owns the place. His smirk follows me. “Don’t keep me waiting too long.”

I roll my eyes at him, but I can’t stop the smile tugging at my mouth as I head toward my father’s office.

I catch my father in the hall, coat already draped over his arm, his hand halfway to the doorknob. He pauses when I call his name, brows lifting, like he wasn’t expecting me to come after him.

“Dad, wait. Can I talk to you, just for a second?”

He studies me with that quiet, unreadable expression of his. I hate it sometimes, how calm he always looks, even when I feel like the floor under me is caving in. But he steps back and leans against the wall in the empty hallway.

“Of course.”

My stomach is a knot. I can still taste Yulian on my lips, the warmth of his cheek against mine. It should make me feel steady, but instead it sharpens the guilt pressing down on me. The mess we’re in, the photos, the videos, the years-long rivalry waiting to explode, it all feels like a storm I’ve pulled everyone into, especially him.

He stands, casual, controlled, like he has all the time in the world.

“I wanted to say-” My voice is steady, though I know my dad can sense that I feel anything but. “I wanted to apologise. For… all of this.”

One dark brow arches. “All of what?”

I gesture vaguely, like that explains the weight on my chest. “The trouble I’m causing. Having to call in my aunts and uncles, getting them involved in something that should be, should’ve been handled better. And the tapes…” My face burns just saying it. I rub the back of my neck, wishing I could sink through the floor. “The photos. We should’ve been more careful. More aware. We weren’t, and now…” I trail off, shaking my head. “Now there’s a lot at stake. I know it’s not just about me.”

He leans back, steepling his fingers, and I brace myself for a lecture. But his eyes soften instead.

“You have nothing to apologise for.”

I blink. “What? Dad, I-”

He cuts me off with a small shake of his head. “The other bosses will not complain. They are more than happy to finally strike at Yulian’s father. I can assure you they have been waiting for an excuse for years, even before you were taken. This is giving them an opening I’m sure they will be all too happy to take.” His voice hardens at the edges, but not at me, at the thought of Yulian’s father, no doubt.

“And whoever took those pictures, those videos… we will find them. We will make them regret it. Torture, kill, erase. It isn’t anything to be ashamed of. How do you think your mother and I made you?”

“Ugh. Dad.”

He chuckles, and leans forward then, his eyes locking with mine. “I see how happy he makes you. I see it in your face, your voice, even now, when you are embarrassed, when you are afraid. You glow, Vaughn. And I will always fight for my son’s happiness.”

Something cracks in my chest. I didn’t expect that. I don’t know why I keep feeling like I have to apologise constantly, when I know he would never blame me for any of it. He has been so good to me my entire life, I just want some way to convey how much he means to me.

I step forward before I can think, cross the space, and wrap my arms around him. He doesn’t hesitate, just pulls me in like he’s done since I was a boy, strong and steady, one hand at the back of my head. I press my face into his shoulder and breathe, trying not to let the emotion spill over too obviously.

“Thank you,” I murmur. It feels too small for what he’s giving me, but it’s all I can manage without falling apart. “For everything.”

He squeezes once, firm, like sealing a promise. “Always.”

When I step back, he studies me again, but this time his expression is gentler. Almost amused. “Go. Before Yulian comes to drag you back by the collar. You have that boy pretty obsessed.”

I laugh under my breath, shaking my head. He isn’t wrong.

I grab his coat from the rail for him, hand it over, and he slips it on with that effortless authority he wears like a second skin. I watch him leave, a flicker of warmth steadying me even as the storm outside still

waits. Because I know I'm not facing it alone.

When I walk back into the living room, I expect Yulian to still be smirking, sprawled across the sofa like being accepted by my parents now means he owns the place, probably waiting for me to sit so he can start kissing my neck again. That's what I brace for. That's what I want.

But what I get is… different.

He's sitting forward, elbows braced on his knees, staring so hard at nothing that the air itself seems guilty. His brow is furrowed deep, jaw tight, like he's chewing something invisible. It's not a good look, not on him. Yulian usually wears chaos like a grin, mischief like it's stitched into his skin. Seeing him this still, this carved out of stone, makes my stomach twist.

"Hey," I say carefully, stepping closer. "You okay?"

He jolts, shoulders snapping back like I've just yanked him out of somewhere far away. His eyes dart to me, wide for half a second before narrowing again.

"No." His voice is low, clipped. "I'm not."

The honesty catches me off guard. He doesn't usually admit that, not outright. If something's wrong, he'll mask it with a joke, or worse, a smirk sharp enough to cut. Not this.

I sink down beside him, close enough our knees brush, and study his face. "What is it?"

He exhales through his nose, long and heavy, then rubs a hand down his face. For a second I think he won't answer, that he'll decide it's not worth it, but then he looks at me again.

"I've been thinking," he mutters. "About who could have taken those videos. Who could have known the location of the cottage."

That lurch in my stomach deepens. The air between us feels suddenly heavy, like he's dragging something dark into the room with him.

"Go on," I say, bracing.

His eyes narrow, scanning me as if searching for cracks in my expression. Then he asks, "You're sure you never told anyone else where it was?"

My spine stiffens. "Of course not. I wouldn't, Yulian, I didn't tell anyone. Not a single person."

He nods his head, almost like he hoped I wouldn't say that. "I know."

Relief flickers through me, but it's thin and short-lived, because the next words out of his mouth make my blood run cold.

"I didn't tell anyone either. But-" He cuts himself off, jaw clenching again. His hand tightens on his knee, pale knuckles. "My phone has a location device in it."

I blink, caught off guard. “What?”

“It’s been there for years. Ordered by my father.” The word father drips with venom, bitter and sharp. “He wanted to make sure he could always keep track of me. Control me.” His lips curl into something between a sneer and a grimace.

I try to wrap my head around it. “So… do you think he got the location that way? Found out where the cottage was through your phone and sent someone?”

The look Yulian gives me is quick, sharp, almost pitying. “No.”

“Why not?”

“Because part of the deal,” he says, his voice tight but steady, “for having a tracker in my phone was that he wasn’t the one who could access it. I made sure of that. Argued it until I won. Told him it was pointless if he could be the one to look. If it was supposed to be for safety, for emergencies, then it made no sense for him to be the one in control. And he actually agreed.”

That feels wrong, hearing it. His father doesn’t sound like the type to agree to anything Yulian wanted.

I swallow. My mouth is dry. “Then… who can access it?”

For the first time, his eyes drop, as if saying it aloud costs him something. His voice lowers, but it lands heavy, like a stone sinking in water.

“The only person who has my tracking is Mikhail.”

The name hangs in the room, heavier than smoke, thicker than silence.

I stare at him, waiting for the twist, the grin, the telltale spark in his eyes that says this is just another one of his games. But it never comes. He just sits there, watching me like he’s waiting for my reaction, daring me to put the pieces together.

Mikhail. His brother-in-arms. His closest confidant and loyal to him in a way no one else has ever been. At least… that’s what I thought.

My chest tightens, sharp and uncomfortable. “You’re serious?”

“Deadly.” He leans back finally, tilting his head against the sofa, eyes fixed on the ceiling. “He’s the only one. No one else could’ve used it. No one else should’ve even known it existed.”

“But- why?” The question bursts out before I can stop it. “Why would he-”

Yulian’s lips twitch, a humourless smile. “That’s the question, isn’t it?”

I feel sick. Not on my own behalf, but for Yulian. I couldn’t even imagine finding out one of the Heathens betrayed me in such a way. It’s not Yulian’s father in some high tower, pulling strings. It’s someone he let close, someone he trusted.

I glance at Yulian, searching his face for more, anger, hurt, betrayal. But what I see is worse. He looks calm. Cold. Like he's already started turning this revelation into a weapon.

"Yulian…" My voice is low, almost a whisper. "What are you going to do?"

His eyes flick to mine, and the smile he gives me is thin, sharp, and frighteningly sure.

"Find out if my best friend is my biggest enemy."

Chapter End Notes

> that is all the chapters for now. i have the next two days free, so i should be able to upload the next tomorrow or saturday :)
> thanks for all the support as always :)

Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yulian

-

I'm sitting in the half-dark, my back against the cold metal of the warehouse wall

I've been here for hours already, waiting. I asked Annie and Mikhail to come immediately, sent a terse message feigning urgency and using the plan my father thinks I'm going along with. Mikhail thinks he is coming to a base of operations where he can help bring down the New York branch.

Neither hesitated to get the first plane over here, not even asking questions.

I run a hand over my jaw, feeling the faint buzz of stubble, my heart drumming in a rhythm that's almost pleasant. All my life I've felt like a cornered animal under my father's boot, like he's always one step ahead, like he's playing chess and I'm just a piece he's moving across the board. I thought if I moved far enough away, to an island on the other side of the world, maybe I could outrun him. But he still knew. Still found ways to berate me for decisions he shouldn't have even known I made.

But tonight, I finally stop being his toy, his chess piece. I'll officially cut away the final tether he has on me before I take him down completely.

I hear the rumble of an engine outside, and the crunching of gravel. Then, footsteps. My fingers drum against my thigh. Show time.

The heavy door squeals as it opens. Annie enters first, quiet and composed, her eyes flicking around the vast space. Mikhail follows, a half-step behind, his usual confidence painted on his face like armour.

And then, just like I hoped, confusion flickers across Mikhail's features. He stops, his head tilting as he scans the interior. There is nothing like he would have been expecting, considering he thinks he is coming to a base of operations. There is just a single chair in the centre of the warehouse, a lone box and table beside it.

"What is this?" Mikhail asks finally, his voice echoing. "Where's the equipment? The people? I thought we were setting up a base."

I smile slowly, staying in the shadows for a moment longer. "Come here, Mikhail." My voice is soft but it carries. "Sit down."

He takes a few steps forward, Annie glancing at him and then back at me. "What's going on, Yulian?" Mikhail's voice is sharp now, trying to reclaim ground. "What is this?"

I step forward, letting the dim light catch my face. "You know," I say, "all my life I've felt like my father's always one step ahead of me. Like he knows what I'm going to do before I even do it. No matter what move I make, he's already there. Already prepared. Already punishing me. I crossed an ocean, Mikhail. An ocean. And it still didn't help. He still found ways to berate me for decisions he shouldn't even have known I made."

Mikhail frowns, folding his arms. “We both know your father has spies everywhere. It isn’t something we can ever truly stop. You said it yourself.”

“I did,” I agree, nodding once. “Spies everywhere. Some even closer than I thought possible.”

His eyes flick sideways to Annie. Just a flicker, but I catch it, and I can tell he thinks I’m insinuating it’s her. It almost makes me laugh. He is so confident, so sure of his own invincibility that even now, when the walls are closing in, he assumes I’m blind to him.

Annie’s expression stays neutral, but I see the faint narrowing of her eyes. She’s reading the air, feeling the tension, but she doesn’t speak.

I take a step closer, boots echoing off the concrete. “Things only started clicking into place,” I continue, “when I found out someone had filmed me and Vaughn. At the cottage.”

Mikhail stiffens but tries to hide it.

I smile, all teeth. “We were the only two people who knew the location. No one else. We couldn’t possibly imagine how anyone found us, couldn’t possibly imagine how someone recorded us and sent it to my father.”

I pause, watching Mikhail’s jaw flex. “But then it clicked. We never told anyone the location. Not a soul. But I do have a tracker on my phone.”

Now his eyes dart to me properly. His mask slips just a little.

“It had just never occurred to me,” I say softly, “to doubt the only person who could access it.”

Heavy silence fills the warehouse.

Finally, Mikhail clears his throat. “What are you implying?” His voice wavers almost imperceptibly. “Yulian… you know me. I’m your best friend. I’ve always been loyal to you. You know that.”

I tilt my head, a slow, almost feral grin spreading across my face. “Stop the bullshit.”

Mikhail stiffens. Annie glances between us, silent.

“I know,” I say simply.

His composure cracks, eyes narrowing. “If you should be suspicious of anyone, it’s her.” He jabs a finger at Annie. “She hasn’t been around long. Do we even know her true intentions yet?”

I bark a laugh, harsh and humorless. “Stop being an idiot, Mikhail. I already questioned my father on it. He confirmed it’s you.”

It’s a lie, of course. But it doesn’t matter what the truth it, if he believes it.

Mikhail’s face drains of color. His mouth opens, closes. “He- he told

you that?”

I step closer again, closing the distance. “Yes.”

His eyes flick wildly to Annie, then back to me. The fight drains out of him, shoulders slumping just slightly. “Yulian…”

I raise an eyebrow. “Go on.”

He swallows hard. Then, finally, the act cracks completely. His voice comes out low, ragged. “Alright. Fine.”

I see him relax, and for a moment I’m confused. Does he still believe he is making it out of this alive?

“You have to understand, Yulian-” he starts, though his voice holds no panic, more like gentleness, like he is speaking to a child. Like he expects me to forgive and forget. “I had no choice. I’m loyal to my pakhan, always. You understand that. When your father came to me, when he approached me at fourteen-” *fourteen? He has been lying to me since we were fourteen?* “-what else was I supposed to do? It was his task. It was an honour. It was-”

“It was betrayal to your closest friend?” I cut him off with amused coldness. “That you let him turn you against a childhood companion, believing that I would actually forgive and forget when it came for my turn to be pakhan?” I step forward, letting the echo of my boots fill whatever courage he has left. “You call that loyalty. I call that cowardice. You were not devoted to a powerful, strong-willed leader, you were devoted to an abusive piece of shit who cares for no one but himself.”

He blanches like I slapped him. “Don’t you speak of the pakhan that way,” he hisses. “He… he’s the only thing that keeps us together. It’s not-”

“It’s not your fault?” I mock, my voice velvet-soft, venom-lined. “Oh, of course. It’s always my fault for refusing to be a puppet, for refusing to obey the man that murdered my mother, beat me to the edge of death, for refusing to bow to the man who made you his dog. Listen to yourself. You are pathetic.”

Mikhail’s face flushes crimson. His jaw grits as his face tightens. He has always preferred keeping his emotions in check. “It does not matter now. None of it does. We are still on the same side. If you have a problem, take it up with your father once we have finished destroying the New York Bratva.”

“You are wrong,” I tell him, the words bright and sharp. “We are not on the same side. Not anymore.” I taste the future across my tongue and it tastes like iron and smoke. “Soon enough, I will be pakhan.”

His laugh is ugly. “Years, Yulian. There are years before you are pakhan. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“There are days,” I say, stepping so close my breath ghosts across his cheek. “There are days, Mikhail. Because I’m going to kill him.”

The room suddenly feels much smaller, and Mikhail’s eyes go wide. “What the fuck-” he stutters, finally losing the composure he has spent years perfecting. “You wouldn’t-”

“Oh, I would,” I purr. “And when I do, I will want only the ones loyal to me by my side. Those who stayed will sit with me. Those who betrayed-” I let the word hang, soft and lethal, “-will be nothing.”

Something in his posture breaks. He stabs a finger at me. “You’re betraying your father for our enemies! For- for- for *Vaughn*? ” His voice snarls with incredulity and hatred.

“That is exactly what I am doing,” I tell him, my voice as cold as the warehouse we are in. “For Vaughn, for Tati, for my mother, for the brotherhood. For myself. And for the way you just spoke my future husbands name-” I grin slyly, “-I will make your death long and meaningful.”

He shouts back, words tumbling like stones. “I tried to help you! I tried to warn you about him, about Vaughn. I tried to steer you on the right path. You fucked it up every time. I had no choice but to report you. I had to-”

He chokes on the rest. He is flailing now, anger, pleading, the whole bitter mixture. He is at once both a clown and traitor and frightened animal. For a beat I let him talk. Let him flail. Let him prove himself to the witnesses of his own ruin.

Then, finally, I step forward in earnest. I close the distance with deliberate slowness because fear swells best when it’s watched. He realizes, perhaps too late, the truth that’s been glaring at him the whole time: he’s trapped. He makes for the door, because every animal runs, and panic pulls him like tide.

I don’t speed up. I don’t need to. Because he is running right for the shadows, and I know exactly what is in those shadows. Or, should I say, *who*.

Vaughn steps out from where he’s been hiding amongst the darkness, casual like he is taking a morning wander. He strolls forward with that

precise, casual cruelty of his, smile playing at the corner of his mouth. “Aww,” he says, mock disappointment loud and clean in the hollow room, “and I was really hoping I’d get to get along with my boyfriend’s best friend.”

Mikhail freezes, eyeing me and then Vaughn, measuring options. He’s cornered. He makes a choice in his panic.

He bolts for Annie.

Of course he does, he thinks she’s the weakest link. He hasn’t liked her from the start, maybe because he knew she was too loyal to me, and not to his pakhan. He thinks she’ll be easy because she hasn’t grown up like us, doesn’t have the same skill. He runs toward the exit with the efficiency of someone who’s still brilliant at making mistakes.

He underestimates her, as he has from the very beginning.

Annie moves like water. One moment she’s an elegant shadow at the edge of his path, the next she’s a bright snap of steel. She moves quickly and proficiently, using the exact right moment as he moves past her to flick her arm out and smoothly inject the syringe I told her to bring straight into his arm.

She executed our plan perfectly, just as I knew she would.

His pace falters, and the colour drains from his face. His eyes try to refocus, searching for options that have already closed. He stumbles, claws at air, and then the warehouse tilts for him. He drops to his knees, then collapses forward onto the concrete in one graceless heap, limbs folding like a marionette whose strings have been cut. He breathes shallow, ratty, then slows, then is out like a light.

Annie places the syringe back into her bag, then smirks and tilts her head at me with a dry, dangerous light in her eyes. “God, I have been waiting to do that since the first time I met the motherfucker,” she says, voice cool as a blade. “What a dick.”

I laugh, short and breathless, and I find myself thankful for the momentary distraction. Because traitor or not, I have my lifelong best friend unconscious in front of me, and I’m about to torture him to death.

“Agreed,” I say, kneeling down just long enough to look at Mikhail’s slack face. “Agreed, indeed,” Vaughn adds, joining us.

Annie steps back, folding her arms. Vaughn moves to my side, his shoulder brushing mine. I feel the warmth of him like armour, like his very presence settles my entire body.

We waste no time getting him tied to the chair, wrists bound in front of him, rope biting into his skin, the shredded hem of his shirt hanging limp. He looks like a man who’s been reduced to the shape of his mistakes: thin, taut, jaw set.

He wakes slow, like he is trying to prolong his end. But it doesn’t matter, there is only one way out for him, and it involves him no longer breathing. His eyelids flutter as he takes a breath, pupils flittering between us, acknowledging he is surrounded. His voice is the same as it was when we were boys, with that same level of stoicism and grumpiness that I always mocked. Now, it feels less like part of *him* and more like part of the wall he had up to keep me in the dark.

-

Vaughn

-

I stare at Mikhail, my eyes narrowed. I despise the man sat before me with every part of my being. But I know this isn't my revenge to take, so I sit quietly, waiting.

"You could have had everything," he says without preamble, directing the line at Yulian. "You could have had it all. Power, respect, the seat we talked about, the life we planned. Instead you threw it away for him." He jerks his chin toward me. The word is a blade and he doesn't try to hide how he means it to hurt.

Yulian doesn't hesitate. He's close enough that I can see the muscles in his neck, the way his jaw works under the skin. He's calm, colder than the concrete under our feet.

"You're wrong," he says quietly, like he's correcting a child. "Vaughn is everything."

Mikhail's mouth quirks, half a smile, half a sneer. "This will never work. Your father will kill you for this. He will crawl through mountains for revenge." He spits the sentence like a prophecy.

"It will work," Yulian replies. His tone is flat, iron. "And I've had enough of hearing you prattle on."

I don't move. I stand where I can see both of them as I feel the tension in my chest, a cord tightened to the breaking point.

Yulian walks around him, circling him like a lion hunting its prey.

"You were my best friend," he says, and there's a weight to it that makes the air go thin. "Most of my life. Secrets, laughs, training

together, memories together, you were the one. I always thought you were the most loyal person I had. If I ever made pakhan — whatever that ends up meaning, you would've been my right hand. That was the plan."

Mikhail blinks, and for the first time there is genuine fear in his eyes, like he hadn't thought until this point that Yulian would actually go through with it. "It doesn't have to be like this," he pleads angrily. "You can still-"

"No." Yulian's voice snaps. There's no room left in him for bargaining. "Even if you were willing to switch sides now, to kneel and swear again, it wouldn't matter. You took those videos. You saw him like that." Yulian's fingers twitch just a little. "I can't allow anyone who's seen Vaughn in that way to live."

It's a sentence that lands with a cold finality.

Mikhail goes silent, as if weighing whether he can salvage anything. He opens his mouth and the room holds its breath, because maybe, *maybe*, he's going to beg, to bargain, to tell us lies that he believes will set him free.

Instead, he spits, "You're doing this for a boy. You're betraying blood for… for Morozov."

"Exactly," Yulian says, and there's no mockery in it, only devotion. "Exactly what I'm doing. And because of that, I want to see you suffer for a little while before the end. Because you hurt him."

And then he starts. There is cold calculation in his movements asYulian works methodically, the tools of his choosing quiet and efficient. There's an ugly businesslike rhythm to it, a metal clamp, the

snap of bindings being tightened. Mikhail grunts and breathes, rattles of sound in the hollow room that eventually turn into screams and pleads.

Because despite his entire life in this world, not even Mikhail can withstand the torture Yulian is capable of.

But I know Yulian doesn't take pleasure in it like he usually would. He would be grinning, laughing, breathing in their screams of pain like ecstasy. Not acting like the robot he is right now. This is a chore for him, something he must do. Because even though this is the required punishment for a traitor, it doesn't change who the traitor is to Yulian.

I keep my eyes open. I think I even enjoy it more than Yulian does. I've never been one to find adrenaline, a high, in violence and torture, not like Yulian, but knowing that he has seen those videos, I understand why Yulian made such a point about killing him simply because he had seen me in that context. The idea that he has seen *Yulian* in that way almost makes me ask him if I can have a turn.

Mikhail keeps his face like stone for a long time. He tries old deflections: sarcasm, righteous anger, the sort of jokes that have lost their function. Each one is a pale attempt to distract from the loss of power, and each attempt shatters. I hear him whisper at one point that Yulian is making a mistake, but Yulian just ignores him.

Hours pass like this. Time stretches and warps. By a certain point Mikhail's voice breaks, and the screams stop coming, rather, a sound that might be a sob slips out, surprising in its smallness. At other points he laughs, bitter and sharp, and I think maybe the pain is driving him mad. Annie remains quiet and still throughout, though I recognise slight enjoyment in her eyes as she watches. Mikhail focuses his attention on her a few times, showing just how deeply his hatred, or should I say jealously, for her runs, but she doesn't grace him with a reply of any kind, not even an acknowledgement, which I think just angered him more.

I stay near Yulian, watching his face, seeing how the thing that steels him is not anger but something closer to grief folded into resolve.

I don't know how long before he stops. The torture isn't theatrical, it's extraction, punishment, a personal, slow correction. It's meant to make Mikhail feel the cost of his choice. At some point the sounds lessen. Muscles unclench. The breath evens.

When Yulian finally steps back, there's a hush in the warehouse like the moment after a storm peels away. Mikhail slumps, head lolling forward, eyes glazed. He's alive, but whatever he had before is gone.

I step forward then, and catch Yulian's eye. He glances at me and there's a quick exchange, a nod that signals a conversation we had earlier. It's small, but it's the sign we've been both waiting for.

"Annie," I say quietly, voice a thread. "Step outside with me for a moment."

She flicks her gaze to me, expression unreadable, and then she rises. She follows, silent, a shadow at the edge of the warehouse light. I feel Yulian's hand find mine for a fraction of a second, and I can tell he needs it, so I squeeze tightly.

We step out into the night, Annie following quietly behind me. For the first few seconds there's nothing but the city breathing around us and the distant drone of traffic, and I let that comfort me.

She leans against the low wall, arms loose, and watches the warehouse door like she's cataloguing everything she sees. Then she smirks and says, deadpan, "Mikhail always hated me. Would've loved

to see him croak it."

It's so blunt, so flat, that I laugh before I can stop myself. It takes me off guard, and I knew that the image I had built in my head of her had never been right, not when it was fuelled with jealousy. But I think about how I would like to get to know the real version of her without my conscious being clouded, especially considering her closeness to Yulian.

"Maybe I haven't had the right read on you," I tell her, still smiling. "I've only ever heard good things. Once we get all this sorted and our organizations start working together properly," I say, glancing back at the warehouse, "I actually look forward to knowing you better. Seeing what you can do."

Annie's eyes chip into something almost faintly pleased. She flicks her gaze to me and says, "I hope to prove to you why Yulian let me so close in the first place. I'll show you precisely what I'm capable of."

It's the kind of promise that could be threat or assurance, and I like that it's both.

"You could start right now," I say, moving onto the reason I've actually asked her out here, the reason that Yulian and I discussed hours ago while waiting for Annie and Mikhail to arrive. "You already know about the videos of me and Yulian. We need those gone. Can you destroy them completely?"

She tilts her head. "I figured this is where you were going."

"Yeah, but you don't have direct access. It needs to happen in New York, before we go to Chicago so we can cover all bases. Can you do that remotely? And in a short amount of time. We don't have long."

Annie's smirk softens into professionalism. "If any of the videos exist on external devices, for example, hard drives, then physical destruction or completely erasing them is the only guaranteed method. You smash the drive, you smash it forever. But if a recording is still plugged into a system, like a computer tied into a network, there are ways to erase or overwrite the data, provided you can access the machine. And I can definitely do that remotely."

I nod. "The Chicago Bratva don't use basic setups. They're not careless. It's not going to be a simple job."

"That's fine," she says. "I like a chance to show off." There's a flicker in her voice that could be humour or a promise. "I'll need powerful equipment, though. Remote access isn't a simple task, also a very good connection to the internet. I can do it, but I'll need the right equipment."

I grin at that, part relief, part admiration. "We thought you might say that." I fish my phone out, thumb through my contacts to find her name, which Yulian gave to me earlier. "Don't worry, we have pretty good technology here too."

She watches me, face unreadable for a second, then steps closer as I send her a message. I type in the address and press send.

"Go here," I say. "Tell them you're with me. They'll be expecting you. You'll have good internet, power, everything you need."

She squints at the screen, then looks up. "You trust them to give me access?"

“No,” I admit, because I don’t know her well and it is the truth. “But I trust Yulian, and he has vouched pretty hard for you.”

She nods her head, and I can see her fighting back a smile. She thumbs the contact I just added, saving it. Her finger hovers, then she looks back at me with a small, almost wry bow. “Thanks, boss.”

I realise that she’s acknowledging the structure we’re hopefully about to merge into, the alliance in which Yulian’s organization and mine will bind. It feels strange and right all at once.

“Thank you, Annie. I look forward to working with you more.”

She nods her head once, before turning and moving toward the car her and Mikhail came in, climbing into the driver’s seat and leaving.

I step back into the warehouse and immediately spot Mikhail’s head is lolling forward, the rope biting into his wrists, eyes half-lidded like he’s been floating under water for too long. He’s alive, technically, but there’s a hollowness behind his gaze that says he’s already elsewhere. I can tell the end is near for him, and Yulian does too.

He is standing over him like some terrible statue.

He looks up as I close the distance and pauses. I spot the gun in his hand, and it is a dark, simple thing. He watches me with eyes that are unreadable, flat as slate.

“Is it sorted?” he asks, quiet, like it’s a question I can answer to make the world sane again.

“Annie’s on her way,” I tell him. “She’s gone.” I say it steady because I need him to hear it. I need him to know that things are coming together, that we are heading in the right direction.

He nods once and turns his attention back to Mikhail like someone returning to a wound. For a second he looks unsure, like he’s trying to remember the shape of the thing he’s about to do. Seeing that cracks something open in me. Yulian loves chaos. He loves the edge and the burn. He loves being the sort of man who can set fire to a room and dance inside the flame. But this- this is different. This man on the chair, almost dead, was once his best friend. That fact hangs in the air like a splinter.

I close the small gap between us and wrap my arms around his waist. It’s instinctual and soft and everything I can do to anchor him to something human. He doesn’t pull away. He lets me.

“You can do it,” I tell him, voice small. “But If you don’t want to-”

His hands press against mine, steadying, not resisting. “No,” he says, but there’s something like a plea under it. “I’m about to be pakhan. This is something I must do.”

I nod because his certainty is what I lean on. If he needs to do this to prove to himself that he is capable of doing the hard things that are required of him, then I will hand him that role. I would hand him the world if he asked.

He lets go and I step back. Yulian moves like a man who’s been practicing the same motion for years, and there’s a tremor to the way his fingers close on the gun. He lifts it slowly and points it at Mikhail. It’s only a few feet, the muzzle is an inch from his temple. The sound

of the room, the hum of the large light above us, the distant city noise, shrinks down until it's a thing I can ignore because everything else is centred on Yulian and that gun and the man who used to be his friend.

The struggle is small and private, and he doesn't pull the trigger at first. He keeps the barrel aimed and the gun trembling the tiniest bit in his hand, like it's a sorrow he can't let loose on the world yet. I can see the fight in him, the part that wants to keep the last piece of what they had, and the other part that knows what must be done. I want to take the gun and end it quick; I want to strip him of this burden. I want to spare him the memory that will echo in him for the rest of his life.

Time stretches. I stand still, a human metronome counting out the seconds. At some point I start to realise that he can't do this completely alone, he needs something more and so I reach out and say his name, soft, urgent, like a touch, "Yulian."

He doesn't flinch per se, but his body moves like his entire being was affected by my voice, and for a beat I wonder if I've overstepped. But the name, maybe because it's mine to say, maybe because it's the push he needs, moves something in him. His jaw tightens. His shoulders square. The trembling in his hand steadies like someone drawing a breath before a plunge.

Then, finally, he pulls the trigger.

The shot is a dry, quick thing, loud enough to punch the air, though neither of us flinch. It makes the concrete under Mikhail's knees scatter dust in a tiny puff. The sound ricochets around the warehouse and then the room fills with the most absolute silence I have ever heard.

Mikhail slumps. The rope at his wrist's sags. The life that was tensed in him drains away; his eyes unfocus, the fight gone like water down a plug. There is no cinematic blood spray, just the slow drip of blood down his forehead where the hole lies.

Yulian drops the gun like it's the last thing he wants to touch. He looks like someone who's been carved open and then sewn back together badly. He breathes once, ragged, a sound that could be a sob, could be a laugh, could be a prayer. The gun in his hand drops to the floor, and he follows it, falling to one knee.

His head bows and his shoulders hunch, as though the weight of the gunshot has finally crashed down on him. His hand, the one that pulled the trigger, dangles at his side, fingers twitching faintly like he doesn't know what to do with them now. The chaos of the moment is over, no shouting, no movement, no struggle, just silence and the lingering scent of gunpowder and blood in the air.

I move toward him without a word, my boots echoing against the warehouse floor.

When I reach him, I crouch down beside him. His hand is still hanging loose, knuckles scraped, the faint tremor of adrenaline not yet gone. I take it gently into mine. His skin is hot, damp with sweat, his pulse erratic beneath my thumb. He doesn't resist, doesn't even look at me at first. He just lets me hold him.

I lift his hand and press my lips to the back of it, slow and steady. It's not just a kiss. It's an anchor. A reminder that he isn't alone here, not in this act, not in the aftermath.

That's when he finally turns his head toward me. His eyes lock onto mine, wild and raw, and I see him completely unmasked. There is no smirk, no cruel amusement. No shield of mischief or madness. Just

Yulian, stripped entirely bare.

Then he moves, sudden, sharp and unstoppable. His mouth crashes against mine, and I'm caught in the force of him. The kiss is deep, messy, desperate, like he's trying to claw something out of me, like I'm the only tether keeping him from unravelling completely. I kiss him back, because how could I not? His chaos has always been my undoing, and right now I want nothing more than to drown in it if it means keeping him afloat.

When he finally breaks away, I'm breathless, my chest heaving as if I'd been the one to pull the trigger. "What was that for?" I manage to ask, my voice quiet but steady.

His gaze is locked on me, burning. "A thank you," he says, his voice hoarse, low, roughened by everything he's been holding in.

I tilt my head, searching him. "For what?"

"For giving me the courage." His words tumble out in fragments, like if he doesn't say them now, he'll never say them at all. "When I had the gun… everything was loud, so loud. My head was filled with every memory of him, the good ones, the ones that made me hesitate. His laughter, the times I thought he was the only one who'd never betray me. I couldn't make myself do it. I kept seeing the boy who stood beside me, not the man who sold me out."

He pauses, swallowing hard. His hand in mine clenches faintly, as though the memory alone still hurts. "And then I heard you. Just your voice. And suddenly it all went quiet. All the chaos, all the noise, it just… stopped. For the first time, I could think clearly. I saw what mattered. The memories with you, Vaughn, they were stronger than everything else. And I realized it wasn't just for me. I wasn't pulling that trigger to prove something to myself. I was doing it for you, too.

Because there's nothing, *nothing*, I wouldn't do for you."

I expect the words to hit me hard, but they don't. Because they aren't unexpected, or shocking. He has proven time and time again that he feels everything he just said, and so putting it into officially words just feels like breathing out.

I cup the side of his face, my thumb brushing over the sharp line of his jaw. His skin is pale, his pulse racing beneath it, but he leans into my touch like he's starving for it. I kiss him again, softer this time, slower. There's no desperation now, just the steady press of lips that say all the things neither of us know how to put into words.

When I pull back, I keep him close, pressing my forehead to his for a long moment before dropping a kiss against it. The gesture feels old, grounding, intimate in a way even passion can't touch.

"I love you," I whisper against his skin.

The words are simple, but they carry everything, truth, promise, devotion, something unshakable even in the chaos we are currently surrounded by, that we are about to walk back into once we leave. I've never been more certain of anything.

He exhales, a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob, and I feel the tension bleed out of him under my touch. His hand squeezes mine back, tighter now, not trembling anymore. And I know this is just the beginning of the life we will create together.

-

Yulian

-

We have just finished disposing of the body. Or, rather, Vaughn just finished. He didn't question me when I struggled, just took on most of the load.

He didn't falter when I did, he didn't flinch when I turned away, when his silence said everything: *I'll do this for you, Yulian. You don't have to shoulder it alone.*

Now we're in the car, the city lights blurring past in streaks of neon and shadow as we drive back to Vaughn's house. The silence between us is comfortable, steady. Vaughn sits behind the wheel, because we both agreed that I shouldn't drive right now.

I sigh, because I realise there is still something I need to do, someone I need to call.

I dig my phone out of my jacket pocket, thumb hovering over the screen for longer than I should. My chest feels tight, like the air inside the car has thickened. Vaughn doesn't press me, doesn't ask who I'm about to call. He just keeps driving, his gaze flicking toward me once, steady, reassuring.

I press *call*.

The line rings twice before it clicks, and then I hear her voice, and I question why it was ever a struggle to press the button in the first place.

"Tati."

“Yulian?” Relief floods her tone immediately. “Are you okay? Tell me you’re okay.”

“I’m fine.” The lie is automatic. But maybe not a lie, not completely. I’m alive, aren’t I? Breathing. Moving. Speaking. For now, that’s enough. “What about you?”

“I’m good,” she says quickly, and I believe her. “But what’s happening over there? Did dad hurt you again? Are you safe? Where’s Vaughn?”

Her voice carries that familiar edge of panic she doesn’t bother trying to hide. I lean back into the seat, letting my head thump gently against the rest. “It’s… complicated. A lot has happened since the last time we spoke.”

“Complicated how?”

I exhale slowly. “Complicated in the way it always is when our father is involved.”

Silence stretches, and then she says, very quietly, “What did he do this time?”

I explain everything to her then, about Vaughn showing up in Chicago, being caught by our father, the blackmail (I can imagine her wiggling her eyebrows when I mention a sex tape), going to Vaughn’s father for help, getting rid of Mikhail, and how we are truly on our way to getting rid of our father permanently.

There's a pause, a sharp inhale, and then her voice, steady and sharp. "Good riddance."

The corner of my mouth twitches. I shouldn't be amused, but I am. My sweet little sister, spitting venom like it's second nature. Maybe I've rubbed off on her more than I realized.

But before I can reply, her tone shifts, brightening, filled with sudden energy. "Wait, hold on. Is Vaughn there with you right now?"

I blink. "Yes."

She practically squeals into the phone. "Hi Vaughn!"

From the driver's seat, Vaughn chuckles softly. "Hello, Tati," he calls, his voice calm and warm.

"I'm so excited to meet you properly soon!" she bursts out.

The words make me stiffen. "What do you mean, *meet you properly soon*?"

"Well, obviously I'm coming back." Her tone is casual, as if she's discussing the weather, not threatening to blow her entire life apart. "I still haven't officially met Vaughn, and I want to. He's my future brother-in-law! Plus, you're about to kill Father, and you're in the middle of a war. You think I'm going to sit across the world twiddling my thumbs while you handle all that alone?"

“No,” I snap before she can get another word out. “Absolutely not. You cannot do that.”

“Why not?” she demands, frustration flaring in her voice. “You’ve protected me long enough. I want to help you like you always help me.”

“You can’t come back, Tati.” My chest tightens, anger flaring to mask the panic clawing its way up my throat. “Because it’s not safe. You don’t understand the position this puts me in, Tati. When I’m Pakhan, I’ll be leader, yes, but I won’t be a dictator. I’ll have underbosses breathing down my neck, questioning every decision I make until I prove myself. And do you know what they’ll demand the moment they see you? Marriage. Alliances. They’ll want to chain you to some bastard who can serve their ambitions. You’ll be a pawn, whether I want it or not. Maybe ten years down the line I could set you free, but not right now.”

She goes quiet, but I can hear her breathing, sharp and uneven.

“That’s why you have to stay away,” I press on, my voice softer now, pleading. “Stay hidden. Don’t tell me where you are, don’t tell anyone. Let them believe you ran away. That’s the only way I can protect you. If they think I let you go, they’ll force me to bring you back. But if you vanish, if even I can’t find you, they’ll have no choice but to accept it.”

Her voice comes back, strained. “So what then? I spend the rest of my life running? Looking over my shoulder every day, waiting for the past to catch up to me? What’s the point of freedom if I can’t even breathe?”

Guilt stabs deep in my chest, sharp and merciless. “I’m sorry. I wish there was another way. But there isn’t.”

“There is.” Her voice steadies suddenly, determination hardening every syllable. “And I’m going to prove it. I’m coming to New York.”

“No-”

“Yes.” She cuts me off with the kind of finality only Tati is capable of. “I’m coming, Yulian. You can yell all you want, but you won’t stop me. I’ll be there for you. I’ll be there for Vaughn. And I… I might have an idea. Something that could solve problems for both of us.”

My grip on the phone tightens. “What idea?”

“I’ll tell you when I see you,” she says lightly, too lightly. I know that tone. It means she’s already made up her mind and nothing I say will change it.

“Tatiana-”

“Don’t you full name me, Yulian. Now I’m definitely coming, no matter what, and that’s final.”

I grit my teeth, fury burning under my skin, but what can I do? She’s just like me. Once she decides, it’s over.

“Fine,” I mutter, the word bitter on my tongue. “But this isn’t a choice without consequences. You know that, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you accept them?”

“Yes.”

I shut my eyes, exhaling hard. “Then so be it.”

There’s a pause, and then her voice lifts again, hesitant this time. “Oh, um. Just so you know, I won’t be coming alone.”

My eyes snap open. “What do you mean?”

“I’ll be bringing Jess.”

I frown. “Jessie? Are you going to stop on the island and pick her up?”

Silence. Then, sheepishly, “not exactly. She’s… actually been with me the whole time.”

I blink, stunned. “What?”

“She ran away with me,” Tati admits quickly, like ripping off a bandage. “Annie got us both new identities. We’ve been travelling together ever since.”

For a moment, I can’t form words. I knew they had something going on, and my sister was heartbroken over her for a time, before that trip

to Paris. But I hadn't realised it was that serious.

"She also wants me to say sorry to Vaughn for ditching without saying goodbye," Tati adds, a little awkwardly.

Vaughn glances at me, amused, and then speaks toward the phone. "Tell her it's fine. I look forward to seeing you both again."

"See? It's fine," Tati chirps.

I drag a hand down my face, muttering under my breath. But I feel a million times better than I did five minutes ago. I guess that is just the effect my sister has on me.

"Well, I suppose I look forward to seeing you guys, too."

"See you soon," she says softly.

"See you soon," I reply.

We end the call, and my entire body feels lighter. Vaughn hums under his breath, fingers light on the wheel, the kind of easy focus I've watched a hundred times. The silence between us is a warm thing, until his phone starts buzzing like a wasp trapped in the car.

It doesn't stop. One, then another, then a steady stream. He glances at it and his lips twitch. I keep my eyes on the road, no, on him, until finally the buzzing becomes unbearable and I snatch the phone from his lap with a scowl. He laughs at me, soft and indulgent, and I feel

the small victory like a heat in my chest.

"Maya Sokolov," I read aloud, scrolling. "Is threatening to kill you. Lidiya's trying to talk her down." My voice is theatrical, higher than it needs to be. Vaughn snorts.

"Don't look so smug," he says, but he's smiling. "I messaged our group chat earlier, Maya, Lidiya, Gareth and I, and told them about you and me. And a brief summary of everything going on. Maya's a bit… murder-y about not being told until now." He reaches to take the phone back, but I curl my fingers tight, keeping it close.

I read the chat out: a rapid-fire of capital letters and angry faces emojis.

Maya: *You what? You didn't tell me? I will end him.*

Lidiya: *Breathe, Maya. I'm sure he had his reasons!*

Gareth: *I knew ages ago, Maya. He told me and not you. How does that make you feel?*

Maya: *You are both dead. You knew and didn't tell me?*

Gareth: *Guilty as charged. But I am Vaughn's best friend and favourite, so it makes sense.*

I narrow my eyebrows at Gareth calling himself Vaughn's best friend. Clearly, I already hold that title. Boyfriend, best friend, everything.

“I’m your best friend, right?”

Vaughn gives a short, amused bark of a laugh. “I can have many best friends, Yulian.” I scowl at him. “But I only have one boyfriend, husband, forever partner,” he adds, and I grin again.

“Me,” I state.

He nods his head and glances over at me. “You.”

Still, I consider getting rid of them so I can have all his attention, all the time, but it would make him sad, and probably not make for a great start to an alliance with their parents.

“I want you to meet them properly soon,” Vaughn says. I want you all to get along, so we can all spend time together.”

I make a face, pulling a dramatic, pouty expression. “Share you? Never.” The words are velvet, but I know they make him smile. My thumb traces the edge of his palm where it rests on the wheel, and I grab it, pulling it to rest on my thigh. Then I link our hands, still on my thigh.

He looks down at our hands, and then at me lifting my phone up high, and his smile breaks into something softer as he laughs loudly. “You absolute shit-stirrer,” he says, and I can hear the affection in the teasing.

I am a shit-stirrer, proudly. I open the camera, angle it just so that

both our faces lit by the dashboard glow, his hand on my thigh where our fingers are entwined. I snap the selfie, an intimate, ridiculous image, and without thinking much I send it into the group chat, from Vaughn's phone.

The buzzing starts again immediately. I read the incoming replies aloud like a sport:

Maya: *I'M HAVING A HEART ATTACK.*

Lidiya: *You two are actually adorable. I can't deal.*

Gareth: *If only you looked as good as Kayden and I.*

As if I could ever look worse than a sixty-year-old.

Then comes a stream of heart emojis and various death threats from Maya tempered with affectionate insults. Vaughn laughs, loud and bright in the car, and I can't help but grin too.

"You shouldn't have sent that," he says, but he leans into me, thumb rubbing circles over the back of my hand. "They're going to riot."

"Good," I say cheerfully. "Let them. Maya can have a coronary. It is what she deserves for threatening you."

"You're lucky I don't kill her myself for it," I add, because old habits of possession die hard. Vaughn's hand tightens in mine the tiniest fraction.

“Enough of your threats,” he says, with mock severity that doesn’t reach his eyes. “She is excited and surprised. I actually think you two will get on like a house on fire when I finally introduce the two of you.”

I mumble in response, doubting that.

I continue scrolling through his messages, eventually leaning sideways to press my head to his shoulder. “I love you too,” I murmur, half to him, half to the glowing screen that still pings with outrage and hearts.

Lidiya’s last message blinks up: *I can’t wait for your wedding.*

A wry, sudden bubble of something like hope tugs at my ribs.

A Wedding.

The idea is ridiculous and impossible and terrifying in equal measure, and for a flash I let myself imagine it. But then I realise I don’t have to stop myself from imagining it, because it is real now. It is real and it will happen because this is going to work.

I squeeze his hand in mine, and he squeezes back, and though the next few weeks are full of uncertainty, I know I’m more than ready to face them with Vaughn by my side.

Chapter End Notes

i hope you all enjoyed and thanks for the support <3

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